

B. L. REID

The Burthen of the Mystery

GENUINELY SYNOPTIC studies of tragedy are scarce, and great ones are scarcer still. Mr. Muller's book¹ seems to me good but not great; it reaches an honorable accomplishment without rising to the stature of the few studies—those of Aristotle, Nietzsche, Bradley, perhaps Gilbert Murray and Herbert Weisinger—which have radically shaped our thinking about tragedy and thereby about life itself. For there is no mistaking the grandeur of the enterprise. Because it insists on asking its old ultimate questions about the nature of man and God, tragedy remains the most important and the most difficult and mysterious subject of literary analysis. The critic of tragedy takes great risks, as Mr. Muller recognizes, simply because the great tragic poets took them. Thus any evaluation of such a book as this ought to begin with a salute to the daring and seriousness of the job it undertakes. Mr. Muller carries through his own bold attempt with impressive yet qualified success.

The Spirit of Tragedy is both learned and intelligent, and in content it is never dull; there is no stupidity in it, and not much waste motion. It is over-concentrated, if anything, and that is surely a venial sin for anyone attempting an overview of the whole span of Western tragic drama. Still, the book does seem to me fairly seriously flawed by certain perversities of choice and emphasis, and by irresolutions as to posture and tone. My wish that Mr. Muller had written a somewhat longer and different book is doubtless subjective and presumptuous. But I feel he never quite resolves in his own mind the question of his proper critical position and angle of attack. Is he a literary historian or a historian of ideas? an impressionistic or a historical critic? an aesthetician or a moral philosopher? Mr. Muller possesses the breadth and flexibility of mind to work well in each of these important offices; but not even he can do justice to all of them in the packed compass of a book of three hundred and thirty-five pages, addressed to a subject as big and dense as tragedy. The scattering of skills and the dispersal of effort makes thinness in the texture of his study; a great deal of matter gets handled, but nothing gets thoroughly kneaded.

What I wish is that he had kept his history-of-ideas framework but drawn his data from fewer figures and fewer plays, read in much closer and more specific detail; or even that he had reversed those ends and means and altered that proportion to create a genuinely inductive structure in which the data might build the ideas, rather than hang from them. But that would probably strike Mr. Muller as a suspiciously new-critical procedure. He thinks of himself, he says, as an "old-fashioned" critic, possessed of the conviction that literature is "a comment on life."

¹ THE SPIRIT OF TRAGEDY, by Herbert J. Muller. Knopf. \$5.00.

His attitude seems unnecessarily truculent and self-conscious. There is nothing really old-fashioned in his position, and critics of any faith must honor such learning and insight as those of this study.

One unfortunate consequence of Mr. Muller's uneasiness, at any rate, is that he is led to set himself questions larger than he can answer, or, more precisely, larger than he can document: his announced intention, to answer the question "why the experience that all men know has so seldom found its appropriate expression in literature, and only in one quarter of the globe"—why there has been so little first-rate tragedy, and that all Western—goes simply unrealized in the text of the book. The peculiarities of national psyche which made tragedy impossible in the Eastern cultures of Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, China, and Japan are ticked off in fewer than ten pages at the back of the volume. Nor does Mr. Muller account for the scarcity of high tragedy in Western culture. His study boils down to an analytical survey of the great texts in Western tragic drama, set accurately and interestingly, if hurriedly, in the context of cultural history from period to period. But that is an immense task in itself, and one not many scholars are equal to.

Selection and proportion are a writer's own business, I suppose, but I cannot help feeling that Mr. Muller makes some seriously wrong decisions in apportioning his time. All goes well through the first chapters on "The Nature of Tragedy," the "Beginnings," the Greeks, and the Elizabethans down to Shakespeare—the first half of the volume; but then a decline sets in. The treatment of Shakespeare is very disappointing, not in quality but in quantity. Apparently Mr. Muller feared to let Shakespeare take command of his book, as he must have done if treated with even moderate fullness. One feels that he is alive to Shakespeare's greatness, but his preordained "design" means that the giant must be fitted into "proportion" in the volume; and that seems to me simply to falsify literary-historical truth. Shakespeare is so grand that he wrecks any proportional scheme, even one that includes the great Greeks; Coleridge was quite right about his "monstrosity." And so one wishes that he might be allowed to dominate such a book as this, if not command it. It is certainly depressing, at any rate, after leaving the scant but rich thirty pages on Shakespeare, to labor through almost forty dullish pages on Racine and Corneille, who are simply inferior beings by any rational standard. Mr. Muller finds these men alien and boring, it seems clear: why not then set aside the "historical perspective" and spend one's time where the real excellence is?

Another decision of this kind strikes me as more defensible but still regrettable. Mr. Muller candidly recognizes that for the past hundred and fifty years the really significant vestment of tragedy has been not the drama but prose fiction: "The tragic spirit has turned to the novel for expression, since it is a form better suited than drama to a complex age, permitting both more amplitude and more inwardness." Why not, then, if it is "the tragic spirit" one is discussing, drop the drama and turn frankly to the forms (including, I would argue, lyric poetry) where the

tragic spirit has kept its fullest vitality? Mr. Muller finds "only two or three" dramatists to compare with the "two or three dozen greater novelists over the last hundred years," yet, "for the sake of consistency, or convenience," as he puts it, he holds stiffly to his dramatic focus. Consistency and convenience are motives unworthy of either this subject or this writer, and they qualify an achievement he is intellectually equipped to make greater.

Mr. Muller's positive virtues are greater than his negative limitations, but they are more obvious and can be noted more summarily. His great virtues are the size and sureness of his learning, which clearly extends to an even larger range than that which he sets himself in this study, and the penetration and good sense of his critical reading, of a quality which almost always leaves one wishing he had more time for each of his analyses. His point of view toward tragedy, or the basic value-structure he finds there, is explicitly humanistic and implicitly agnostic. "The common element in the diverse visions of life expressed in the great tragedies," he writes in one of his admirably straight-forward summations, "is a reverence for the human spirit. Man retains his dignity in failure and death, whether or not he is to enjoy a life to come. Because of this dignity, all is not vanity." Mr. Muller moves chronologically through the four main developments of Western tragic drama, the fifth-century Athenian, the Elizabethan, the French classical, and the modern following Ibsen, tracing out the constants and the variants in the content, the form, and the tone of the great plays in which the masters have invested their "tragic sense of life," their painful and exalted sense of the "mystery of man's being in a mysterious universe."

His treatment of Aeschylus and Sophocles is mainly valuable as a compact collection of basic fact and intelligent opinion, none of it dull or dubious, but none of it impressively original. His principal service here comes from the fullness and the aptness of the social and historical setting he is able to assemble about the plays. Of the Greeks he writes best on Euripides, the homeless child of the "Enlightenment" and broken-hearted student of passion: "human injustice, human irrationality, human folly." The fact is that Mr. Muller is at his very best throughout this volume when he is dealing with the borderline cases, the plays or the playwrights that tend to slip through the net of the standard definitions of tragic propriety. He seems to work most freely and happily in those situations which demand critical discriminations of special intricacy. Thus he is good on Ibsen, better on Strindberg, and best on Chekhov. His pages on Chekhov seem to me superb, the most sensible yet the subtlest response to that elusive genius I have ever found. Thus, too, his analysis of *Hamlet* and *Lear* is solid but conventional, while his reading of the anti-heroic play of *Troilus and Cressida*, that comical-historical-romantic tragedy, is so sympathetic and original as to carry us toward, if not to, some insights into tragedy that look deep and new.

But I wish Mr. Muller had gone on to explore that "sense" in which this play can be called "more tragic than *Hamlet*." But "the heart of it

is a total revulsion," he concludes, and ends by deciding that *Troilus and Cressida* "makes plain how fatal cynicism is to the tragic spirit." The sense in which this play is more tragic than *Hamlet* must be something like a folk-sense of endemic disaster, of the congenital alienation of man in the universe. A longer look at that sense probably would have carried Mr. Muller back to a closer examination of the theory of ritual origins and ritual "essence" in tragedy, a theory he dismisses too lightly throughout. A longer look at that folk-sense of tragedy would force us to take account, too, of such "improper" brands as that tragedy of attrition George Eliot writes about so movingly in *Middlemarch*; and finally it might make us do away with that old puristic and unhelpful distinction between the "pathetic" and the "tragic" and get free thereby to think philosophically about the bitter mystery that includes them both and is the true ground of the tragic.

I have committed Mr. Muller's sin of disproportion in writing at greater length of his weaknesses than his strengths. By any fair standard that proportion ought to be reversed. But one is betrayed by the unrealistic wish for the perfect book on this perfect subject. *The Spirit of Tragedy* comes closer to that than any other book in a long time.

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

The Farmers' Daughters

WHAT DID THEY FEED you Margaret when you were a kid? asked the doctor.

Oh—chick peas and fatback, I guess.

That ought to have put more flesh on those skinnybones of yours.

I hated it, used to throw it under my chair.

Her friend Helen was of much the same temper: It was bad enough before—but when my brother was killed. . .

What happened?

That old man. He told him if he caught him hunting in his woods again he'd kill him and he did. I hate the place.

Did they do anything to him?

Huh! I see you don't know anything about the south where I come from. But that's nothing. I love *you*. . . (with a laugh).

When a chance guy asked: What about the kids? Margaret said: Agh, they'll be all right. If they yell, the woman next door will hear them.

Where a' we going?

Same place. Wait a minute! She ran back into the house and returned with a small blanket.

What the hell? It isn't cold.

It may be by the time we get back.

There's something to that.

So he started the car. Hey! as she threw her arms about his neck, pulled his head around and kissed him. I'm driving the *car*! You wanna wreck us?

You can drive with one hand.

Yeah, but not without my head.

Am I glad to get out of that place tonight.

Have you heard from your husband?

Yes, that son-of-a-bitch; and I mean just that. I wanna get drunk I gotta get drunk tonight.

O.K., if you do it on beer.

We'll see about that. That li'l hunchback will give it to me on tick if I don't pay.

What's your favorite flower, Margaret?

Why?

I just want to know.

What's yours?

No. Come on—don't be so quick on the trigger so early in the evening. I think I can guess.

Petunias! (emphasizing the second syllable.) God knows I've seen enough of them. No. Red roses. Those are really what I love.

It is Helen's turn now: Talk, just keep talking, the doctor said to her.

Both hands. I had to hold the glass with both hands to drink from it—so I could drink from it. I drank just gallons of water. It was last Tuesday I made up my mind. Let's see. Yes, it was last Tuesday. I said to myself, I was lying on the bed before breakfast, I said, just as if it was two people talking: What's the matter with you? I didn't answer. Don't you know what is happening to you? Yes, I said, I know. You're a goner if you go on in this way. Yes, I said, I know. Well, are you going to stop it? I didn't answer. Because if you don't, you're finished. If you give in now you'll never. . . You know where you're headed? For a nervous breakdown—of the worst sort. Do you know what that is? You've seen enough of it, you ought to. Yes, I said, I know. And are you so stupid, so weak, that you can't stop taking a drink? Are you? I didn't answer. Tell me. You haven't the guts to do what you know you've got to do. No answer. Then stop it. Yes, I said, I'll stop it. Right now, I said. Right now. Not another drop of wine. Not another drop. But it's been hell I tell you. When I made out my grocery list—this is cute—I always put down at the bottom - *Wine*! They know what to bring me. I held the pen in my hand and said a regular merry-go-round: I won't do it, I won't do it, I won't do it, I won't do it. Isn't that cute?

Marvelous! He kissed her on the cheek, under the ear. I'm proud of you.

Oh, I could have gone to the phone any time and they would have sent it up. Then that old merry-go-round would start again:

I won't do it, I won't do it, I won't do it. I kept it up until I tired myself out. That was Tuesday. Wednesday I was so weak I stayed in bed almost all day. I drank gallons of water to sweat it out. I was dripping. But I wouldn't give in. I wanted to call you up but I was afraid you'd be mad at me. I took some of those pills.

A simple antispasmodic, they won't hurt you.

Can I take them? Then on Thursday I went out in the yard—and just for a minute it would flash across my mind: Order the wine! and the merry-go-round would start again: I won't do it, I won't do it. . . I just kept saying that so I couldn't get in another word. And finally tired myself out again, saying that every time I thought of the wine. But today, almost a week later, I woke up and knew I was over it. *I'll never touch another drop. Never.*

I believe you.

But just today I began to wonder: What comes next? I don't know.

Why are you so good to me? Margaret said to her friend, the doctor.

I admire your guts.

Just that? Um. . . (poking her little chin out aggressively). She pouted: Don't you love me . . . just a little teeny bit?

What the hell did you come here for tonight? Just to talk? Because. . .

Why shouldn't I? You told me I could come any time I wanted to. Didn't you?

Yes, I mean anything special?

You want me to go? Because if you do just say the word.

Now LOOK! dumbbell, don't be miffed. I love you. I'm crazy about you—and your pretty little face, like a pansy. Your beautiful black hair. . .

It's getting grey.

—even white teeth and . . .

My eyebrows are much too heavy.

Listen! You've a complexion and as fine a pair of black eyes as I have ever seen. Not vicious, like a horse. . . but can't you see that I'm *busy*!

Do you want me to start kissing you?

No! for God's sake.

Then tell me some more about myself, how pretty I am.

Then look at your little ears, like pink sea-shells. Your nose, perfectly made. Cupid's mouth. . .

Now you're poking fun at me. That's not what I came for. Can you give me something to develop my *breasts*? Look at them. I used to have nice little breasts. Why, we were playing strip poker the other night—with our husbands—and Helen had to take off her brassiere—right to the skin. She was beautiful. Pink and round. And me. . .

She hasn't had two kids the way you have.

I know, but lots of women have had children and still have pretty breasts.

Not many.

Can't I *do* anything?

Wear one of those brassieres.

No, but I mean seriously, isn't there something I can really do to develop my breasts?

I heard of a woman answered an ad: they sent her a picture of. . .

I've heard that one before: a picture of a man's hand.

I'll try. I told you I'd try. But you got to get a little *weight* on you first.

When Helen first met Margaret, a neglected and lonely woman from the south among all these strangers, her heart began at once to beat violently.

When she learned that Margaret too had been a farmer's daughter, was about to have a child, was small, pretty, apparently defenseless, there was nothing else for it but that she must be taken at once under the other's protecting wing. More than that, she loved her, loved her at first sight. Besides, Margaret really needed her badly.

How far did you get with your schooling?

Middle of my second year at the university.

You did better than me.

But you're a trained nurse.

All the good that did me.

In the first burst of confidence Margaret and Helen had learned all they needed to know of each other to make up their minds and hearts.

What did *you* do?

Practically ran away. Lied about my age and entered a nurses' training school in Florida. What happened to you?

I got married.

Local boy?

Boy from military school I met at a dance. Don't ask about him. Anyway he's away on construction jobs most of the time when he isn't looking for another wife.

Any children?

One—a boy. And this... (placing her hand on her belly).

Good!

They became friends for life. They both had come recently into small inheritances which they similarly spent for small new houses. Helen's was, like herself, charming in every detail, within and without. Her husband's family, an old one in those parts, possessed some old furniture, silverware, some quaint knick-knacks and pieces of jewelry and signed letters and documents from the early 1800's of which they were justifiably proud.

I'm going to bundle them all up into a heap some day—I'm sick of them—and throw them into the fire.

She was much more concerned with her canary, a beautiful rich yellow specimen who would come to the edge of the cage and kiss her each morning as she talked to it in endearing terms.

All the birds of the neighborhood knew her, winter and summer, and came to her for their sunflower seeds, pecked diligently at the device her husband had made for the suet which she would make ready for them whenever the supply ran low.

Her house was painted white, the rooms were sunny and papered in attractive colors. She would meet the doctor at the door in what he took to be lounging pajamas—and sometimes change her clothes during his visit for no reason that he could ever determine.

The garden was Helen's special pet. Once he was looking at a picture on her wall, an 8 x 10 snapshot that had been given her by the photographer. It was a winter scene, taken within the suburb itself a few years back, a stubble field covered by new fallen snow.

In the background is a young elm, on a sky of loose clouds. To the right, nearer the camera, an oak tree of about the same age cut off by the edge of the frame. The trees are leafless, as would

be natural at this time of year. But the remarkable thing about them, that cannot be seen except in a good light, is the branches and the bushes near them, covered by a coating of thin ice!

Caught by the camera-eye it sparkled as he had seen it, often, in the many ice storms he had witnessed in the past. This filled him with nostalgia.

Helen, when she saw how he was affected, took the picture from the wall and, handing it to him, insisted that he take it home and keep it as his own.

He had never seen such gaiety, celebration, depicted in a picture—not an entire countryside filled with apple blossoms. Helen, as soon as she had it pointed out to her, kept pace with his appreciation. The trees blossoming with ice seemed to them both a triumphant thing; it made their hearts sing, therefore he was grateful to her for the picture, wanted to keep it where he could see it when he was depressed.

The doctor gave her the shot of vitamin.

My patients used to say I have wonderful hands, she said. You never have been loved as I could love you, my sweet. Come in when you are passing sometime and have tea with me. There's nothing wrong with that, is there? Sometimes you look *so* tired.

A lot of boloney.

What I liked about you, she said to him, is that you told me it was killing me—I knew that—but you never told me to stop it. And the stupid thing about it, that's what made me so mad, is that I didn't want to drink.

I've never seen anybody deliberately kill himself with drink. Didn't you really take anything but wine?

I hate the taste of whiskey!

You must have drunk a hell of a lot of cheap wine in your day.

Yesterday, Helen went on, I thought what I needed was a little exercise so I thought to break up some ground in the backyard—to plant me a mess of turnip greens. You always like them. But the ground was too hard, so I used a pick. I like to kill myself. I really needed that shot.

Anytime you like.

I don't believe that last lot *was* turnip greens. Down home we scattered it broadcast—with the oats. It came up anywhere. Then you just mow the oats and there it is.

Can't you get a job these war years at your own profession? You were a top flight nurse you know.

Not in this town. I read a good joke in the papers today. Two girls who lived together. Somebody asked one of them what kind of liquor her friend drank. I don't know, she replied. What do you mean you don't know—hasn't she given you even a taste of it? She got it for Christmas, the label was off, she was afraid to drink it so she uses it for perfume.

She went on: We were never allowed to call them 'niggers' at home, my father wouldn't stand for that. He'd whip 'em or lynch 'em but we never could use that word.

In her new house Margaret would lie by the back fence in her abbreviated bathing suit and let down the front of it, as much as she dared, to get herself sun-tanned—as if it were down home. Her neighbors laughed among themselves and were mildly shocked at the "indecent exposure." Their kids came around her and stared. She was unconscious of making a spectacle of herself.

Margaret was a demon house cleaner from way back. It drove her crazy but you could feel her saying to herself, it has to be done, so she'd do it. Besides it quieted her nerves when her husband would be away—would put her mind to sleep.

At first the doctor didn't mind it so much. She would exhaust herself, he would remember, her head done up in a cloth, until he had to warn her: You'll have a miscarriage if you keep that up.

She had a mania for scrubbing floors and woodwork until he thought she'd scrub the paint off the walls, so desperate did she seem.

You can't keep a good gal down.

That's what keeps you so thin. Take it easy. You'll wear yourself out.

Go on! I'll never wear myself out that way. What am I going to do with myself? I can't read *all* the time.

The next day she'd be laid up with a sick headache. He never caught her at it but he knew she'd take a slug of whisky sometimes—to calm herself.

What's a girl to do?

As Helen phrased it: Yuh hear? That too much for any woman, leastwise fuh a woman like Margaret who was never built for it. She can't stand it much longer, the poh child.

Her older boy drove her crazy: What can I do with him? I'm going to beat him some day. . . I'm really afraid of myself.

She would scream at him when he was out playing, until you could hear her round the block—a voice high-pitched and shrill that used to bring her father and brother in from the far field. Enough to set her neighbors' teeth on edge. No wonder the boy looked shamefaced and abashed at her and took pleasure in thwarting her in small ways. He didn't trust her.

When she offered the doctor a glass of wine as sometimes happened, he'd hear the boy perhaps say: Mother, stop drinking! This would infuriate her. She'd leap from her chair, seize him by the shoulder and in spite of his resistance push him out the back door: Go on and play.

Aside from each other the girls didn't seem to have a friend in the world, anyone they could let their hair down for, except the doctor. He would say: I'm no good for them. But he was fascinated.

Margaret's face was undoubtedly the thing which first led him on and the suppressed excitement of her manner. Until in a flash she would turn vulgar, empty her mouth of some expression that would make a mechanic green with envy.

Blushing crimson; That just slipped out, she'd say with a laugh, Pardon me!

Only her emaciated body kept her from being picked up by any but the rough guys who didn't give a damn for details—if they looked close enough. She was sitting perpetually on a powder keg without knowing it. If she'd only had a BODY! She looked more like a boy than a girl.

He had seen her, many times, as her doctor, naked. She was painfully thin, really starved in appearance, with skin unhealthy, dark and dry, with prominent veins over the chest and belly that made her anything but attractive. Nothing about her to excite passionate approaches except the savage fistful of black hairs sticking out prominently at the bottom of her belly, heavily matted and, due to her thinness, plainly to be observed under a thin dress—as she well knew.

All her energy of whatever sort, due to her loneliness as she grew more desperate, seemed to center finally, there. Gradually her life withdrew its more tender advances and fell back on something she could more count on for success. Her mind, such as it

was, was thwarted. She talked sometimes of the past but she was still too young for that. She occasionally would visit the farm—she was trying unconsciously to find a way. Christmas! or one of her mother's increasing illnesses were occasions, as time advanced. She thrashed about as her life funnelled on.

She had Helen, yes, but Helen wasn't a man.

Thanksgiving was always a big day.

Margaret would go down to the farm for that day dragging the children along. They would have a meal, cooked by her mother, of Maryland turkey, the best turkey in the world, with cranberry sauce and oyster filling. And Margaret would always see that some of it would be set aside for the doctor, her devoted friend—slices of white meat, a leg or whatever could be had for their annual banquet—a rite of unacknowledged significance which she meticulously counted on come hell or high water.

This would be a Saturday, let's say, to allow time for traveling. He'd go to her house about noon. The children would already have been fed and sent outside or into the cellar to play. She'd be in her best bib and tucker. A table would have been set, usually in the kitchen, for two, with all formality, and they prepared to eat.

Cocktails, they invariably began with cocktails! soup, the turkey with stuffing, and whatever vegetables there were in the market to be had at the time. Then would come cake, one of her mother's famous cakes, or pie. Coffee and, this was *de rigueur*, a small glass of Hennessy Three Star brandy.

The whole affair was a poetic occasion, a love feast, a feast dedicated to the heart and to the mind, a despairing avowal and celebration.

This went on for several years.

Once in a while he'd hear indirectly from Helen how she and her husband had been on a little party with Margaret and Mac, the new boy friend. But he always put the guy down, although he had never seen him, as being rather sappy. As a matter of fact, as we all learned later from Helen (who else could have told us?) Margaret had been intimate with her new friend for a long time. He appealed to her in a way she could not resist. He was sensitive, more refined than she, the college atmosphere, knew Paris and Rome and being unmarried with a good bed at his sister's couldn't see why he of all the deserving loafers there are in the world should

look for a job. He didn't. That the boys around his home town took him for somewhat of a fairy didn't bother him in the slightest.

Margaret used to lend him money surreptitiously until she ended up by practically supporting him. She was always a sucker that way. She sympathized with him, mothered him until finally when he came to her with tears in his eyes she took him in, "broke down" and made him her lover.

One day all hell broke out. The fracas started, if the doctor had been correctly informed, very innocently as serious events in love or war have always started, the evening before.

Helen being away, or it might not have happened, Margaret had gone out with Helen's husband and the boy-friend to drink a little beer. But that evening, for no reason as the boresome hours wore on, Margaret found herself with two protectors at her side growing low down drunk. Nobody could stop her or even noticed the condition she was in until they all started to get to their feet about one in the morning.

About that time the men had decided that it was time to get the lady home to her children, asleep as usual in their beds. They set out but with the fresh air in their faces Miss Margaret decided that she'd have none of it. She began to put up a fight and when they got to the front door of her house refused to go in.

At the racket she raised all her neighbors were awakened. She started to curse and yell at the top of her voice. Lights began to go on all about them.

The men, embarrassed, decided she'd have to go in whether she wanted to or not! opened the door which was not locked, pushed her through and left, driving off into the night—thinking no doubt that she'd quiet down and behave as soon as she realized that her situation was hopeless.

Not Miss Margaret.

She broke out of the door and down the street after the car screaming: Come back you sons of bitches! but being quickly outdistanced changed her tune, calling out for Bill, Bill the milk-man, to come to her aid.

There was a terrific scandal—the police were called. The children wakened and cried. Finally, with the assistance of the women of the neighborhood Margaret was undressed and put to bed.

When she realized next morning what had happened she decided to end her life. She took her children into the garage with

her under pretext of driving down to the farm—but they were big now, beyond her calculations, too big for her to handle. She put them into the back seat of the car, got in herself and started the engine without opening the garage doors.

Her whole life, the life of the community at large as it existed for her, threatened at that moment to tumble about her head. She must have felt a certain despairing exhilaration. There was the church, the civic order, the man and woman of it, every artistry the spirit could propose, by her own act to be broken into pieces—broken to pieces everything that even the Board of Health might stand for, the beams and shingles of every private residence of the community no matter how pretentious or humble they might be shattered beyond repair.

But the boys, particularly the older one, realized they had been trapped and would be suffocated if they remained longer in that place. They broke from the car. She fought them but they got away screaming and ran off.

At this turn of events Miss Margaret reopened the garage doors, backed the car out and took off, ignoring the kids, to find her companion Mac of the night before. He was not at home. She caught up with him at an ice-cream parlor, picked him up, drew three hundred dollars—all she had—from the local bank. Following which the two of them fled, onto the roads of the state.

It was all as anyone could easily have foreseen: drink, immorality—but to have dragged poor harmless Mac along with her, member of such a really decent family, was just too much. What a bitch a woman can prove herself in the end to be. A man is at least courageous about it! Even tried to kill her own children to boot. My God, a potential murderess!

The family came and collected the children who, when it was over, found no doubt that they had enjoyed all the excitement and attention. Everyone felt relieved, that was that, let her go, who gives a damn?

Helen got a postcard from her after weeks of agonized waiting; she and Mac were spending the night at a roadhouse somewhere in Pennsylvania before moving on.

Then a brief letter, posted along the road. They had what remained of the \$300. When that was spent, they planned to blow their brains out.

Good-bye, darling, I love you. Don't think bad things about me, I had to do it . . .

It was left unsigned.

Helen was alarmed and heartbroken.

2

They never liked me down there, said Helen to the doctor.

I can see that.

What can you see?

That they never liked you down there.

I was too fussy. When I was in the operating room it had to go just so. I was suture-nurse for some of the best in the city. . . Two little colored boys took care of my sister and me when we were small children, George Mills and Norris Rance. Joe Scott danced. Oh I wish some day I could write a story, a true story about people.

That's what everyone wishes.

They're just like us. When I was a child, me and my sister, my mother had a raft of children and she didn't have time for us. So she had a little colored boy to take care of us—when I was about five or six years old, about like that. His name was Neil. He lived in the house and watched us so we didn't get into trouble. There was another little colored boy—he didn't live very far away. And my sister and I would get up on the hill in the woods and scream our lungs out for them. They both would come running and we'd play there all morning. We'd have a wonderful time together. Years later, after we were all grown up and he'd gone away—when he came back to see us all once more—we were the only ones he wanted to talk to. And the other one named Scott. My sister and I would wait for him in the evening sometimes before my father would come in—oh, around five o'clock or like that. We'd put up a game on him: Scott, dance for us! won't you? We were just little children and he'd dance, tell us a story with his dancing and we'd love it. He'd been ploughing in the fields all day and yet he'd dance for us any time we'd ask him. It was wonderful. It would be a young man calling on a girl. He'd go to the door and knock. Her mother would come, he'd talk to her. Then she'd tell her daughter to pick up some chips and he'd dance that. Then she'd tell her to dig potatoes. Everything like that—all danced out before my father could come home and catch us at it. He was wonderful.

(Telephone. She answers it.)

Who was that?

Oh, just the telephone company tracing those calls that were bothering me last week.

Who was it?

Just some little boys across the street. I don't mind but I was a little jittery then...and when I'd go to the phone and hear: Oh go drop dead! I almost jumped out of my skin. It made me mad so I thought I'd try to find out who it was. I knew it was them...

I was only nine years old when I was baptized, Helen said. In a creek—I was ducked. I had on my best pink dress and I didn't want to get it wet. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost! Splam! My father didn't want it done, he said I was too young. But when he was looking over the fields or something like that my mother had made me get dressed and out of the house, in a minute—and I was baptized. I was always a sickly child and she probably thought I might die unblessed in the night. When you've been baptized you can take communion. Everybody drank out of the same cup. Blackberry wine, everybody was drinking blackberry wine. My aunt used to make it. That's how I acquired a taste for wine. My mother used to make it too. Not very much but we always had some around the kitchen if anybody had diarrhea or a belly ache. I don't know if it did any good but we always got it anyway. If you didn't make it just right it turned to vinegar. One day I just got some poured into a teacup when I heard my mother coming! So I drank it down quick. It was vinegar! but I wouldn't let on. Vinegar!

Do you want to hear something funny? It'll make you laugh. He laughed.

I'll tell you. You know the woman, a friend of mine, you've met her here but no matter. She told me to use acetone to take the lacquer off those brass andirons that I was polishing. You've seen 'em. So I called up the drug store. You're used to my southern accent so you know what I'm saying but some people don't understand me. What? he said, and I could see he didn't know what I was talking about. Then it flashed on me what he probably thought I said: some acetone to take the lacquer off my *ass*! I

got laughing so I could hardly talk to him. Don't you think that's funny? I'm glad you like it. I like it. It tickled me slap silly. Jeepers Creepers! Will you excuse me, I have to go the the bathroom again.

While she was out of the room his eyes began playing about, out the window to the garden and came to rest after a moment above the fireplace on the mantel where a small china doll occupied a place apart.

When she came in he saw that she had changed her dress, her Dresden china blue eyes blinking at him above a house-coat of mixed colors and faded blue slacks.

That? he queried, pointing, Yes, that little doll.

That's Pauline. I've had her all my life.

He took in the lace boudoir cap over yellow curls, bound up with pink ribbons and smiled; Well?

She cost fifteen cents. She was given to me when I was two years old and went all the way through training school with me. She's full of sawdust, you know, all but the head and hands and feet. I used to play with her, mostly when I went to visit my grandmother. Once she got lost and I spent almost a whole day looking for her. Do you know what? When I washed her her head came off. I took her to a doll hospital and what do you think they did? Sent her all the way back to Jacksonville. Just where she came from. She's never been away from me. . . . No, I'm not beautiful. There's nothing beautiful about me.

You're not the one to judge: when you talk about that doll you're beautiful.

Anyhow, if there's anything that's beautiful about me, it's you; you know *that* darling. Do you hear those church bells ringing? I can stand it now but a month ago they drove me nuts.

I hear them.

They have a new minister who used to be a Presbyterian and so, naturally, he has to be High Church. The old one was pretty deaf—he was a dear. This one has those bells ringing at all hours—whether there's a service or not. I think he just likes to hear 'em. First it was just one old bell but now it's chimes—worked from the street-current. I hate 'em. But the worst is, those damned chimes sound exactly like my front door. I used to get up early, put on my bathrobe, give my husband his coffee and go back to bed again—to sleep till noon or any time.

With your bottle beside you?

Naturally. Until I'd hear the front door bell ring, get up bleary eyed, struggling to put on my bathrobe, and stumble to the front door thinking it might be a special delivery letter from a friend or anything at all. Nobody there. I couldn't make it out. Until one day when I knew nobody was at the door I heard that damned bell. I listened until after a while I was sure of it. It wasn't my own chimes I'd been hearing but two blocks away those church bells dragging me out of bed at all hours.

(Finally she appealed to her doctor.)

A lot of people are in your position, he told her. They don't like it either but what can you do to stop it?

You tell me and I'll do it.

Well, you might go the the dominie, tell him it disturbs you, ask him to cut it out.

Is that what you want me to do?

I don't want you to do anything, but if you are annoyed that's the first thing to do. Go up to his door, ring the bell and tell him what you want. Are you an Episcopalian?

No, but I'll do it.

He invited me into the parsonage. I went in. The first thing he said to me was: You've been drinking.

That's none of your business. I've come to complain about the constant ringing of your church bells.

You shouldn't drink. Do you know what it leads to?

Are you going to answer me? If not please let me go.

What's your objection to the chimes?

They annoy me when I want to rest. I don't like them and I think I have a right to my privacy and rest.

But many people like them.

I don't know anything about that. They annoy *me* and I wish you'd stop ringing them at all hours of the day.

I'm afraid I can't do that but I'll be glad to call on you some time and talk it over again. You really ought to stop drinking. It isn't good for you.

With that, I left.

He did call one evening when my husband was home, looked around the house, maybe he thought he could talk to him but

he wouldn't have anything to do with it. He just referred him back to me.

You're living in a romantic dream, like a child and that is why you drink, he said. You're trying to escape reality and it's ruining your health. You'll have to face reality sometime. Look at that little doll you have on your mantel there. That's what you're trying to be again, a romantic child.

That's not just a doll, I said. That's Pauline.

He started to laugh. I stopped him.

You don't understand. That doll's got much more personality than you could ever think of having. Don't speak to me that way. If you can't stop those bells from annoying people who have no reason to want to think the way you do, you'd better go. I mean it.

And he went.

Never let that man come in this house again, said my husband. Why did you let him come in the first place?

Well, after all, I said, he wanted to come. Let him see for himself.

I'm mean as a snake today and moody as the devil. How was the last specimen I sent you? she said to him.

Normal in every way.

I thought so. Stop in and see me, any time at all. I'm working like a fool, putting in time on the lawn today.

Don't work too hard.

I've got to work. It's the only way I can sleep. Have you got a minute? Talk to me, I need to hear your voice. . . I just stand behind a wall. I'm two persons. I watch everybody moving around me and I can't mix with them. It makes others want to do the hula but not me, it leaves me cold as a stone.

That's your Dutch ancestry coming out. (She had told him once that she was a direct descendant of Henry Hudson. From no more than the blondness of her hair he had believed it—the generations her forbears had spent among the savages of North America.) All you can do with the most beautiful woman in the world is to go to bed with her—thoroughly. Sounds awful, doesn't it? And you can do that with any woman . . . except . . .

Except what, she said.

Except for her beauty. And what can you do with that, even

if it has not beat you before you begin—as it will certainly beat you after. That's why all the great dramas with love as their theme are tragedies.

Sweetheart, you never fail me. That's the reason I love you. There it is, ungetable. We can't possess it . . .

At least I can't, she said.

. . . and if we don't succeed in that, it will destroy itself, give it only a little time.

Come on out in the kitchen. I'm really proud of my biscuits. It's one of the few things I can do well. But this arm! I've been ironing too much with it. Sometimes I don't know what I'm talking about . . . do you know the meaning of roses?

No.

Love. And do you know the meaning of jonquils: I desire affection. I never had any interest in sex as a child. We were a big family and used to play and all that. We had a lot of fun but I never thought of anything else. It never occurred to me.

Well, it occurs to some women.

I know it. As far as my mother was concerned, said Helen, it's as much her fault as his. Why, he slept with every woman on the place. She knew it. He had a little house, as far as from here to the garage, with two rooms in it, where one of the women lived who worked on the farm. Now you know why he kept her there? If my mother wanted to leave him, she should have left him then. Now it's too late.

Margaret and Mac, her boy friend, didn't of course, commit suicide. Instead, when they got their breath, she got a job in a Miami restaurant, and for a while in a flower shop.

The shop where she landed was delighted to find her. The woman who owned it had been hard pressed. Cash again. Nothing to do but take care of flowers! She proved herself deft, after a few days, as any professional and almost as speedy, at making up bouquets for weddings and funeral wreaths. She was a success, making a moderate salary and for a month or two happy as a lark.

But, Mac had his bike stolen one night and as befit a gentleman had taken a taxi, at three in the morning, at considerable expense. That made Margaret mad.

Do you think I'm made of money? Bad enough for me to have

to buy you a new bike, but why you have to ride around in a taxicab after midnight. . .

When Helen arrived four months later preceded by a telegram, Margaret almost ate her up for joy.

Amid tears and embraces, during those few days they had together, the two women spent the hours day and night in an almost continuous exchange of confidences. Mac was entirely forgotten.

They had really only one room. They saw him once peering at them through the woodwork of the closet in which he lived and later observed him in a most undignified position at which they laughed fit to kill calling each other to the crack to witness one after the other.

They giggled together in wonder at the shocking sight.

After a few days Helen had to go north again vowing, in a shower of kisses, to return at the proper time for the wedding which Margaret was still determined to go through with.

She had cut her finger in her work about the shop and had it wrapped up in a dirty bandage. There was no one else in the church but the minister's wife. She and Helen stood beside each other and cried. Buckets of tears came from their eyes all through the ceremony.

The doctor had a climbing rose in his garden named Jacquot which his wife and he both very much admired. It was a peach-pink Rambler, the petals fading to a delicate lavender after the first flowering. More than that, the rose thrived in their garden against odds thought by the man who sold them the plant to be overwhelming: It winter kills in this climate, it'll be gone after the first two or three years.

In spite of that its vigor was phenomenal, you couldn't kill it. It covered the trellis with a profusion of blossoms that in early June were a wonder to see. In addition it was delicately scented so that their whole yard smelled of it when it was in bloom. He had never encountered it in any other garden.

Once he spoke of it to Helen and invited her to come over and see it and whiff its odor during the flowering season.

They gave her a layered shoot; she planted it and it took hold

at once. It throve phenomenally in ground specially prepared by her husband and when she unexpectedly sold her new house and moved farther into the country, Jacquot went with her.

When Margaret came north again, after Mac had had his teeth fixed and been inducted into the army, she had been completely sobered as far as could be seen.

When she appeared at last at the doctor's office she almost fell into his waiting arms for gratitude.

Mac was shipped off to his camp in the Great Lakes region. She had found employment at the Bendix factory manning an electro plating set-up.

It was rough. At the plant she wore dungarees from morning to night, kept her hair covered, and was treated as well as her lack of bulk would permit, as a man. She heard profanity and other foul talk and dished it up, some of it addressed to her own person, with the best of them. She didn't like it but the pay was tops. She could handle herself; no one was kidding her. She was the only woman in the department.

A few grey hairs were beginning to show. He saw her rather regularly now, when she'd come to show him her deposit book at the local building and loan. She'd hold up her hands pathetically for him to see how stained they were, the fingers permanently blackened, the knuckles cracked to the very wrists from the acid they were using.

Gloves are impossible. Nobody can do fast work with gloves on his hands. I'm out for the money!

Why don't you ask them to shift you? There must be a softer job they could offer you.

Oh, I could do better if I wanted to but I make more *money* this way and I don't have to go out to supper with anybody.

Mac kept begging for money—to buy cigarettes, kept yowling that he couldn't get along on a soldier's pay.

He's no man! I'm through with him.

But she yielded as she always had—sent him what he'd ask for—up to a good slice of her weekly check.

You know I got a husband in the service, I got to look out for him.

One of the most affecting things she did, as far as the doctor

was concerned, was to bring him her bank-book once a month to show him how much she had deposited during the time. It crept up steadily, that deposit.

That cigarette money! Mind you he has his pay, all of it. He never sends me a cent.

Sometimes he'd come right out with it and ask her for fifty dollars. She'd send it to him. Sometimes she spoke of other men and women she'd entertained in her apartment. She asked him more than once to visit her himself there.

Come on over and see me. You don't even know how nice I've fixed it up.

He went, finally, and found it very clean and attractive. She didn't tell him that her landlord had just borrowed forty dollars from her to pay his oil bill—or she might have been cold over the week-end. She certainly was a sucker for a hard-luck story.

Helen told of a brawl they'd all been in at a nearby tavern: Margaret was drunk as a coot. Her cousin, from down home, along with her boy friend of the moment, from the plant, had been at it all evening. He was jealous of the guy in uniform—and with good reason perhaps.

God damn you, said Margaret, stop pickin' on my cousin. I'm not pickin' on anybody.

You've been doin' it all evening and I'm tired of it. He's not only my cousin but my friend, been my friend, my intimate frien' for a long time.

You said it!

What do you mean by that crack?

You heard me the first time.

You contemptible little son-of-a-bitch... but she didn't have time to finish the sentence when he cuffed her alongside the head, as it happened, fracturing her eardrum so that she had to be taken to a doctor because of the pain of it.

That finished Helen. She told Margaret that she was through with her and that if ever she came into her house again with that man her husband would throw him into the street.

Armistice Day! the war over, Margaret told her doctor of another man who during those years so rapidly fading into the past had attracted her interest, her maternal interest in this case. He was a frail creature she had encountered among the

other workers in the shop, the other men would have nothing to do with him; a frightened kid, whom, as a consequence, she had taken under her wing.

He told her his story, how, after many minor adventures he had met an Episcopal bishop in New York who proposed that the boy should be a woman to him; that if he would consent to it, all his financial worries would be over for life.

Margaret listened, sympathetically, though she was tremendously amused and put up a fight for her sex against the bishop's blandishments. Apparently she must have taken the boy on among her other conquests; he was about her own size, had had no success with women up to that time. It was a mere idle gesture of friendship on her part to fill in the time for other game to appear.

Afterward he wrote her a letter, when the plant had been closed at the end of the war, telling Margaret how grateful he had been to her for her sympathetic understanding of his "case", adding that he was going with a nice girl now and expected shortly to marry her.

Money was the thing now. Margaret had saved close to \$2,000 by her industry. The war over, Mac would be coming home soon—and she didn't want to see him. She was afraid she'd weaken and take him back and she didn't want to do that. Soon she'd be heading back south to Florida for her new divorce. Nothing would be permitted to interfere with that.

Don't tell anyone! I'm going to find a new job somewhere and settle down permanently.

You'll never do that—if I know you.

Wise guy, huh?

I know you too well. Some sharp-shooter will get around you and some morning when you wake up your \$2,000 will be gone.

You think so?

I'll bet a quarter on it.

So you take me for a nut?

I take you for what you are. We all love you and you don't make it easy for any of us to say that.

She pouted—like a child.

You'll do it all over again and nobody can stop you. You've done things to US which are inexcusable. And yet . . . I don't blame you. That's a trait that people like you exhibit—to our

envy—and despair—a sort of power that you have over us. I still believe in you, that you are not guilty.

She was looking straight into his eyes now with her mouth slightly open.

He continued: Not only that, but in many ways you are the best of us, the most direct, the most honest—yes, and in the end, the most virtuous.

Suddenly she wrapped her arms around his neck, curled up on his knees and sobbed quietly. He held her a moment then gently put her down.

Listen kid, someone trying to get your money away from you right now?

She gave no direct answer: My father died last year, you know, and he left us the farm. My share, when my brother gets around to it, will be \$3,000. If you think I'm going to let any man bamboozle me out of that you're mistaken. I've made my will.

Have you?

...and it's in my safe deposit box. When I die everything is going to the children.

Good! But listen to me. If ever you get into a jam, if someone gets you cornered, just make out a check for the whole amount, if you have time, stick it in an envelope, address it to me and drop it in the first mail chute you find handy. It will be safe.

Helen told me the same thing.

In New Orleans, after her divorce, the next thing he heard was that she was starting a new life. She had been offered employment as an assistant in the dental office of two brothers; took one look at them and decided to seek elsewhere.

It turned out to be an assistant again, to a department store photographer. He offered her \$25 a week and an opportunity to learn the business. She was still pretty and quick witted and as she knew now from her experience in the war plant, able with her hands. She got on fine with her employer, in fact made a hit with him.

Both the doctor and Helen, who long since had forgiven her completely, heard from her by letter—with snapshots enclosed. Everything was working out fine. The weather was just her dish, New Orleans was beautiful, so much better than New York to live in . . .

I'll bet the little so-and-so is married! Helen said. In fact I know it. She would have written me more often if it weren't so! And I know who it is. It's that bastard she had a brawl with in the tavern, the man who hit her in the ear. She always said she was going to get even with him for that . . . that time her cousin was up here from the south . . . and if it IS! . . . I don't trust him. I hate him, and she knows it. She's a fool.

Then came a letter. She *was* married, and to that very man.

I knew it. I knew it! He's ten years younger than she is. That's all she wanted.

—we've been married four months. Perhaps this is the biggest mistake I ever made in my life. But you wouldn't know him. He's so kind and helpful in everything. He never goes out with the boys but brings me all his pay every Saturday night regularly. I built me a house . . .

I knew it, said Helen.

—it's the cutest little thing you ever saw. It's on an irregular plot of ground like this . . .

There was a pencil-sketch of a plot narrow at the front and broader at the back, on which was placed the floor plan of a small bungalow.

—we've done practically all the inside ourselves. I've got me a raise at the store and we're buying furniture. I never want to live again as I did those years up north . . .

So the letter went on.

The very day after Helen had shown the doctor the letter, her husband came home with a clipping from the New York paper. Helen called the doctor up at once: Come down here just as quick as you can! She's dead. I can't talk now.

The story ran like this. There had been prowlers in the neighborhood on several nights prior to the shooting. To protect themselves and their property Margaret's husband had kept a loaded 22 calibre rifle lying on the floor at his bedside. It was a dog barking, so the man testified, that had wakened him and his wife at about the same moment. Margaret's bed lay between him and the window.

Shoot out of the window! she said.

The figures were vague. He became excited and bewildered. He fired and his wife cried out: I'm hit! and collapsed on the floor.

He rushed into the yard, fired four more shots to arouse the neighbors.

He deliberately murdered her. I know just how it happened. It didn't happen at one A.M. like the first clipping said. It was six A.M.—that makes all the difference in the world. It was Monday morning when she'd be getting dressed to get ready to go to the office. I know her well, sitting in front of her dressing table fixing her hair—she had such pretty hair. I'm sure they had been fighting. She probably made him furious over something she'd said—you know she could be insulting and say the most maddening things. He said he'd shoot her and she dared him to do it. Then she leaned over, this way, down to the left to pick up a bobby-pin she'd dropped—I've seen her do it a thousand times—with her back to him. So he shot her, through the back, as she was leaning over. I'm sure of it. No one came to the funeral but her family and me. They didn't open the casket. There were no flowers beside the bunch of red roses I'd sent her, her favorite flower. —How are you, my sweet? Take good care of yourself 'cause I can't afford to lose you. When she died, I died too, you're the only one I have left.

At the inquest, the bullet, a 22 long, was found to have entered the body by a small hole, at first unobserved, low on the right side, at the back just above the waistline. It traveled diagonally upward through the chest toward the heart, from the inside, passing through that organ, flattening itself against the left collar bone, killing her instantly.

NORTHROP FRYE

The Realistic Oriole:

A Study of Wallace Stevens

WALLACE STEVENS was a poet for whom the theory and the practice of poetry were inseparable.¹ His poetic vision is informed by a metaphysic; his metaphysic is informed by a theory of knowledge; his theory of knowledge is informed by a poetic vision. He says of one of his long meditative poems that it displays the theory of poetry as the life of poetry (486), and in the introduction to his critical essays that by the theory of poetry he means "poetry itself, the naked poem" (*N.A.* viii). He thus stands in contrast to the dualistic approach of Eliot, who so often speaks of poetry as though it were an emotional and sensational soul looking for a "correlative" skeleton of thought to be provided by a philosopher, a Cartesian ghost trying to find a machine that will fit. No poet of any status—certainly not Eliot himself—has ever "taken over" someone else's structure of thought, and the dualistic fallacy can only beget more fallacies. Stevens is of particular interest and value to the critical theorist because he sees so clearly that the only ideas the poet can deal with are those directly involved with, and implied by, his own writing: that, in short, "Poetry is the subject of the poem" (176).

It has been established in criticism ever since Aristotle that histories are direct verbal imitations of action, and that anything in literature with a story in it is a secondary imitation of an action. This means, not that the story is at two removes from reality, but that its actions are representative and typical rather than specific. For some reason it has not been nearly so well understood that discursive writing is not thinking, but a direct verbal imitation of thought; that any poem with an idea in it is a secondary imitation of thought, and hence deals with representative or

¹All references to Stevens' poetry are accompanied by the page number in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, 1954, and all references to his critical essays by the page number in *The Necessary Angel*, 1951, preceded by the letters *N. A.* I am sorry if this procedure makes the article typographically less attractive, but the proper place for such references, the margin, has disappeared from modern layout.

typical thought: that is, with forms of thought rather than specific propositions. Poetry is concerned with the ambiguities, the unconscious diagrams, the metaphors and the images out of which actual ideas grow. Poet and painter alike operate in "the flux Between the thing as idea and the idea as thing" (295). Stevens is an admirable poet in whom to study the processes of poetic thought at work, and such processes are part of what he means by the phrase "supreme fiction" which enters the title of his longest poem. The poet, he says, "gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it" (*N.A.* 31), and fictions imitate ideas as well as events.

Any discussion of poetry has to begin with the field or area that it works in, the field described by Aristotle as nature. Stevens calls it "reality," by which he means, not simply the external physical world, but "things as they are," the existential process that includes ordinary human life on the level of absorption in routine activity. Human intelligence can resist routine by arresting it in an act of consciousness, but the normal tendency of routine is to work against consciousness. The revolution of consciousness against routine is the starting-point of all mental activity, and the centre of mental activity is imagination, the power of transforming "reality" into awareness of reality. Man can have no freedom except what begins in his own awareness of his condition. Naturally historical periods differ greatly in the amount of pressure put on free consciousness by the compulsions of ordinary life. In our own day this pressure has reached an almost intolerable degree that threatens to destroy freedom altogether and reduce human life to a level of totally preoccupied compulsion, like the life of an animal. One symptom of this is the popular demand that the artist should express in his work a sense of social obligation. The artist's primary obedience however is not to reality but to the "violence from within" (*N.A.* 36) of the imagination that resists and arrests it. The minimum basis of the imagination, so to speak, is ironic realism, the act of simply becoming aware of the surrounding pressures of "things as they are". This develops the sense of alienation which is the immediate result of the imposing of consciousness on reality:

*From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves. (383)*

The "act of the mind" (240) in which imagination begins, then, is an arresting of a flow of perceptions without and of impressions within. In that arrest there is born the principle of form or order: the inner violence of the imagination is a "rage for order" (130). It produces the "jar in Tennessee" (76), the object which not only is form in itself, but creates form out of all its surroundings. Stevens follows Coleridge in distinguishing the transforming of experience by the imagination from the re-arranging of it by the "fancy," and ranks the former higher (ignoring, if he knew it, T. E. Hulme's clever pseudo-critical reversal of the two). The imagination contains reason and emotion, but the imagination keeps form concrete and particular, whereas emotion and reason are more apt to seek the vague and the general respectively.

There are two forms of mental activity that Stevens regards as unpoetic. One is the breaking down of a world of discrete objects into an amorphous and invisible substratum, a search for a "pediment of appearance" (361), a slate-colored world of substance (15, 96) which destroys all form and particularity, symbolized by the bodiless serpent introduced in "The Auroras of Autumn" (411), "form gulping after formlessness". This error is typically an error of reason. The other error is the breaking down of the individual mind in an attempt to make it a medium for some kind of universal or pantheistic mind. This is typically an error of emotion, and one that Stevens in his essays calls "romantic," which is a little confusing when his own poetry is so centrally in the Romantic tradition. What he means by it is the preference of the invisible to the visible which impels a poet to develop a false rhetoric intended to be the voice, not of himself, but of some invisible super-bard within him (*N.A.* 61). In "Jumbo" (269), Stevens points out that such false rhetoric comes, not from the annihilation of the ego, but from the ego itself, from "Narcissus, prince Of the secondary men". Such an attitude produces the "nigger mystic" (195, 265), a phrase which naturally has nothing to do with Negroes, but refers to the kind of intellectual absolute that has been compared to a night in which all cows are black, a world clearly no improvement on "reality," which is also one color (*N.A.* 26).

A third mode of mental activity, which is poetic but not Stevens' kind of poetry, is the attempt to suggest or evoke universals of

mind or substance, to work at the threshold of consciousness and produce what Stevens calls "marginal" poetry and associates with Valéry (*N.A.* 115). Whatever its merit, such poetry for him is in contrast with "central" poetry based on the concrete and particular act of mental experience. Stevens speaks of the imagination as moving from the hieratic to the credible (*N.A.* 58), and marginal poetry, like the structures of reason and the surrenderings of emotion, seeks a "hierophant Omega" (469) or ultimate mystery. There is a strong tendency, a kind of intellectual death-wish, to conceive of order in terms of finality, as something that keeps receding from experience until experience stops, when it becomes the mirage of an "after-life" on which all hierophants, whether poets or priests, depend. But for the imagination "Reality is the beginning not the end" (469), "The imperfect is our paradise" (194), and the only order worth having is the "violent order" produced by the explosion of imaginative energy which is also a "great disorder" (215).

This central view of poetry is for Stevens based on the straight Aristotelian principle that if art is not quite nature, at least it grows naturally out of nature. He dislikes the term "imitation," but only because he thinks it means the naive copying of an external world: in its proper Aristotelian sense of creating a form of which nature is the content, Stevens' poetry is as imitative as Pope's. Art then is not so much nature methodized as nature realized, a unity of being and knowing, existence and consciousness, achieved out of the flow of time and the fixity of space. In content it is reality and we are: "Participants of its being" (463); in form it is an art which "speaks the feeling" for "things as they are" (424). All through Stevens' poetry we find the symbol of the alphabet or syllable, the imaginative key to reality which, by bringing reality into consciousness, heightens the sense of both, "A nature that is created in what it says" (490).

However, the imagination does bring something to reality which is not there in the first place, hence the imagination contains an element of the "unreal" which the imaginative form incorporates. This unreal is connected with the fact that conscious experience is liberated experience. The unreal, "The fabulous and its intrinsic verse" (31), is the sense of exhilaration and splendor in art, the "radiant and productive" atmosphere which it both creates and breathes, the sense of the virile and the heroic

implied by the term "creative" itself, "the way of thinking by which we project the idea of God into the idea of man" (*N.A.* 150). All art has this essential elegance or nobility, including ironic realism, but the nobility is an attribute of art, not its goal: one attains it by not trying for it, as though it were definable or extrinsic. Although art is in one sense an escape from reality (i.e., in the sense in which it is an escape *of* reality), and although art is a heightening of consciousness, it is not enough for art simply to give one a vision of a better world. Art is practical, not speculative; imaginative, not fantastic; it transforms experience, and does not merely interrupt it. The unreal in imaginative perception is most simply described as the sense that if something is not there it at least ought to be there. But this feeling in art is anything but wistful: it has created the tone of all the civilizations of history. Thus the "central" poet, by working outwards from a beginning instead of onwards toward an end, helps to achieve the only genuine kind of progress. As Stevens says, in a passage which explains the ambivalence of the term "mystic" in his work: "The adherents of the central are also mystics to begin with. But all their desire and all their ambition is to press away from mysticism toward that ultimate good sense which we term civilization" (*N.A.* 116).

Such ultimate good sense depends on preserving a balance between objective reality and the subjective unreal element in the imagination. Exaggerating the latter gives us the false heroics that produce the aggressive symbols of warfare and the cult of "men suited to public ferns" (276). Exaggerating the former gives us the weariness of mind that bores the "fretful concubine" (211) in her splendid surroundings. Within art itself there has been a corresponding alternation of emphasis. In some ages, or with some poets, the emphasis is on the imaginative heightening of reality by visions of a Yeatsian "noble rider"

*On his gold horse striding, like a conjured beast,
Miraculous in its panache and swish. (426)*

At other times the emphasis is ironic, thrown on the minimum role of the imagination as the simple and subjective observer of reality, not withdrawn from it, but detached enough to feel that the power of transforming it has passed by. These two emphases, the green and the red as Stevens calls them (340), appear in

Stevens' own poetry as the summer vision and the autumn vision respectively.

The summer vision of life is the *gaya scienza* (248), the "Lebensweisheitspielerei" (504), in which things are perceived in their essential radiance, when "the world is larger" (514). This summer vision extends all over the *Harmonium* poems, with their glowing still lifes and gorgeous landscapes of Florida and the Caribbean coasts. Its dominating image is the sun, "that brave man" (138), the hero of nature who lives in heaven but transforms the earth from his mountain-top (65), "the strong man vaguely seen" (204). As "we are men of sun" (137), our creative life is his, hence the feeling of alienation from nature in which consciousness begins is really inspired by exactly the opposite feeling. "I am what is around me" (86), the poet says; the jar in Tennessee expresses the form in Tennessee as well as in itself, and one feels increasingly that "The soul . . . is composed Of the external world" (51) in the sense that in the imagination we have "The inhuman making choice of a human self" (*N.A.* 89), a subhuman world coming to a point of imaginative light in a focus of individuality and consciousness. Such a point of imaginative light is a human counterpart of the sun. The poet absorbs the reality he contemplates "as the Angevine Absorbs Anjou" (224), just as the sun's light, by giving itself and taking nothing, absorbs the world in itself. The echo to the great trumpet-call of "Let there be light" is "All things in the sun are sun" (104).

There are two aspects of the summer vision, which might be called, in Marvellian language, the visions of the golden lamp and of the green night. The latter is the more contemplative vision of the student in the tradition of Milton's pensive poet, Shelley's Athanase, and Yeats's old man in the tower. In this vision the sun is replaced by the moon (33 ff.), or, more frequently, the evening star (25), the human counterpart of which is the student's candle (51, 523). Its personified form, corresponding to the sun, is often female, an "archaic" (223) or "green queen" (339), the "desired" (505) one who eventually becomes an "interior paramour" (524) or Jungian anima (cf. 321), the motionless spinning Penelope (520) to whom every voyager returns, the eternal Eve (271) or naked bride (395) of the relaxed imagination. Here we are, of course, in danger of the death-wish vision, of reading a blank book. Some of the irony of this is in "Phosphor

Reading by his Own Light" (267), as well as in "The Reader" (146). The bride of such a narcissist vision is the sinister "Madame La Fleurie" (507). But in its genuine form such contemplation is the source of major imagination (387-8), and hence Stevens, like Yeats, has his tower-mountain of vision or "Palaz of Hoon" (65; cf. 121), where sun and poet come into alignment:

*It is the natural tower of all the world,
The point of survey, green's green apogee,
But a tower more precious than the view beyond,
A point of survey squatting like a throne,
Axis of everything. (373)*

From this point of survey we are lifted above the "cat," symbol of life absorbed in being without consciousness, and the "rabbit" who is "king of the ghosts" and is absorbed in consciousness without being (209, 223).

The autumnal vision begins in the poet's own situation. To perceive "reality" as dingy or unattractive is itself an imaginative act ("The Plain Sense of Things," 502), but an ironic act, an irony deepened by the fact that other modes of perception are equally possible, the oriole being as realistic as the crow (154), and there can be no question of accepting only one as true. It is a curious tendency in human nature to believe in disillusionment: that is, to think we are nearest the truth when we have established as much falsehood as possible. This is the vision of "Mrs. Alfred Uruguay" (248), who approaches her mountain of contemplation the wrong way round, starting at the bottom instead of the top. (Her name is apparently based on an association with "Montevideo.") The root of the reductive tendency, at least in poetry, is perhaps the transience of the emotional mood which is the framework of the lyric. In *Harmonium* the various elaborations of vision are seen as projected from a residual ego, a comedian (27 ff.) or clown (Peter Quince is the leader of a group of clowns), who by himself has only the vision of the "*esprit bâlard*" (102), the juggler in motley who is also a magician and whose efforts are "conjurations." When we add the clown's conjurations to the clown we get "man the abstraction, the comic sun" (156): the term "abstraction" will meet us again.

This *esprit bâlard* or dimmed vision of greater maturity, *un monocle d'un oncle*, so to speak, comes into the foreground after

the "Credences of Summer" (372) and the "Things of August" (489) have passed by. In September the web of the imagination's pupa is woven (208); in November the moon lights up only the death of the god (107); at the onset of winter the auroras of a vanished heroism flicker over the sky, while in the foreground stand the scarecrows or hollow men of the present (293, 513).

To this vision belong the bitter "Man on the Dump" (201), the ironic "Esthetique du Mal" (313), with its urbane treatment of the religio-literary clichés, such as "The death of Satan was a tragedy For the imagination," which are the stock in trade of lesser poets, and the difficult and painfully written war poems. It is more typical of Stevens, of course, to emphasize the reality which is present in the imaginative heightening of misery, the drudge's dream of "The Ordinary Women" (10) which none the less reminds us that "Imagination is the will of things" (84). The true form of the autumnal vision is not the irony which robs man of his dignity, but the tragedy which confers it ("In a Bad Time," 426).

At the end of autumn come the terrors of winter, the sense of a world disintegrating into chaos which we feel socially when we see the annihilation wars of our time, and individually when we face the fact of death in others or for ourselves. We have spoken of Stevens' dislike of projecting the religious imagination into a world remote in space and time. The woman in "Sunday Morning" (66) stays home from church and meditates on religion surrounded by the brilliant oranges and greens of the summer vision, and in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" (59) it is suggested that the poet, seeking an increase rather than a diminishing of life, gets closer to a genuinely religious sense than morality with its taboos and denials. For Stevens all real religion is concerned with a renewal of earth rather than with a surrender to heaven. He even says "the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written" (*N.A.* 142). It is part of his own ambition to compose hymns "Happy rather than holy but happy-high" (185) which will "take the place Of empty heavens" (167), and he looks forward to a world in which "all men are priests" (254). As this last phrase shows, he has no interest in turning to some cellophane-wrapped version of neo-paganism. He sees, like Yeats, that the poet is a "Connoisseur of Chaos" (215) aware that "Poetry is a

Destructive Force" (192), and Stevens' imagery, for all its luxuriance and good humor, is full of menace. From the "firecat" of the opening page of the *Collected Poems*, through the screaming peacocks of "Domination of Black" (8), the buzzard of "The Jack-Rabbit" (50; cf. 318), the butcher of "A Weak Mind in the Mountains" (212), the bodiless serpent of "The Auroras of Autumn" (411) and the bloody lion of "Puella Parvula" (456), we are aware that a simple song of *carpe diem* is not enough.

In the later poems there is a growing preoccupation with death, as, not the end of life or an introduction to something unconnected with life, but as itself a part of life and giving to life itself an extra dimension. This view is very close to Rilke, especially the Rilke of the Orpheus sonnets, which are, like Stevens' poetry in general, "a constant sacrament of praise" (92). "What a ghastly situation it would be," Stevens remarks, "if the world of the dead was actually different from the world of the living" (*N. A.* 76), and in several poems, especially the remarkable "Owl in the Sarcophagus" (431), there are references to carrying on the memories or "souvenirs" of the past into a world which is not so much future as timeless, a world of recognition or "rendezvous" (524), and which lies in the opposite direction from the world of dreams:

*There is a monotonous babbling in our dreams
That makes them our dependent heirs, the heirs
Of dreamers buried in our sleep, and not
The oncoming fantasies of better birth. (39)*

In the poems of the winter vision the solar hero and the green queen become increasingly identified with the father and mother of a Freudian imago (439). The father and mother in turn expand into a continuous life throughout time of which we form our unitary realizations. The father, "the bearded peer" (494), extends back to the primordial sea (501), the mother to the original maternity of nature, the "Lady Lowzen" of "Oak Leaves are Hands" (272). In "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" these figures are personified as sleep and memory. The ambivalence of the female figure is expressed by the contrast between the "regina of the clouds" in "Le Monocle de mon Oncle" (13) and the "Sister and mother and diviner love" of "To the One of Fictive Music" (87). The poet determined to show that "being Includes death and the imagination" (444) must go through the same world

as the "nigger mystic," for a "nigger cemetery" (150) lies in front of him too, just as the sunrise of the early play, *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise*, is heralded by a hanged man. The search for death through life which is a part of such recreation leads to a final confronting of the self and the rock (*N.A.* viii), the identification of consciousness and reality in which the living soul is identified with its tombstone which is equally its body (528). In this final triumph of vision over death the death-symbols are turned into symbols of life. The author of the Apocalypse prophesies to his "back-ache" (which is partly the *Weltschmerz* of the past) that the venom of the bodiless serpent will be one with its wisdom (437). The "black river" of death, Swatara (428), becomes "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" (533), a river *this* side of the Styx which "flows nowhere, like a sea" because it is in a world in which there is no more sea.

If we listen carefully to the voice of "the auroral creature musing in the mind" (263), the auroras of autumn will become, not the after-images of remembrance, but the *Morgenrot* of a new recognition. As the cycle turns through death to a new life, we meet images of spring, the central one being some modification of Venus rising from the sea: the "paltry nude" of the poem of that name (5); "Infanta Marina" (7); Susanna lying in "A wave, interminably flowing" (92); "Celle qui fût Heaulmiette" (438) reborn from the mother and father of the winter vision, the mother having the "vague severed arms" of the maternal Venus of Milo. This reborn girl is the Jungian anima or interior paramour spoken of before, the "Golden Woman in a Silver Mirror" (460). She is also associated with the bird of Venus, "The Dove in the Belly" (366; cf. 357 and "Song of Fixed Accord," 519). It is also a bird's cry, but one outside the poet, which heralds "A new knowledge of reality" in the last line of the *Collected Poems*. The spring vision often has its origin in the commonplace, or in the kind of innocent gaudiness that marks exuberant life. Of the spring images in "Celle qui fût Heaulmiette" the author remarks affectionately, "Another American vulgarity"; the "paltry nude" is a gilded ship's prow, and the "emperor of ice-cream" presides over funeral obsequies in a shabby household (64). "It is the invasion of humanity That counts," remarks a character in *Three Travellers Watch a Sunrise*. "Only the rich remember the past," the poet says (225) and even in "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (524)

there is still a parenthetical association of new vision with a poverty which has nothing to lose.

In "Peter Quince at the Clavier" beauty is called "The fitful tracing of a portal." Portal to what? The word itself seems to mean something to Stevens (*N.A.* 60, 155), and in the obviously very personal conclusion of "The Rock" it is replaced by "gate" (528). Perhaps Stevens, like Blake, has so far only given us the end of a golden string, and after traversing the circle of natural images we have still to seek the centre.

The normal unit of poetic expression is the metaphor, and Stevens was well aware of the importance of metaphor, as is evident from the many poems which use the word in title or text. His conception of metaphor is regrettably unclear, though clearer in the poetry than in the essays. He speaks of the creative process as beginning in the perception of "resemblance," adding that metamorphosis might be a better word (*N.A.* 72). By resemblance he does not mean naive or associative resemblance, of the type that calls a flower a bleeding heart, but the repetitions of color and pattern in nature which become the elements of formal design in art. He goes on to develop this conception of resemblance into a conception of "analogy" which, beginning in straight allegory, ends in the perception that "poetry becomes and is a transcendent analogue composed of the particulars of reality" (*N.A.* 130). But nowhere in his essays does he suggest that metaphor is anything more than likeness or parallelism. "There is always an analogy between nature and the imagination, and possibly poetry is merely the strange rhetoric of that parallel" (*N.A.* 118).

Clearly, if poetry is "merely" this, the use of metaphor could only accentuate what Stevens' poetry tries to annihilate, the sense of a contrast or great gulf fixed between subject and object, consciousness and existence. And in fact we often find metaphor used pejoratively in the poems as a form of avoiding direct contact with reality. The motive for metaphor, we are told, is the shrinking from immediate experience (288). Stevens appears to mean by such metaphor, however, simile or comparison, "the intricate evasions of as" (486; cf. "Add This to Rhetoric," 198). And metaphor is actually nothing of the kind. In its literal grammatical form metaphor is a statement of identity: this is that, A is B. And Stevens has a very strong sense of the crucial importance of poetic identification, "where as and is are one" (476), as it is only

there that one finds "The poem of pure reality, untouched By trope or deviation" (471). Occasionally it occurs to him that metaphor might be used in a less pejorative sense. He speaks of "The metaphor that murders metaphor" (*N.A.* 84), implying that a better kind of metaphor can get murdered, and "Metaphor as Degeneration" (444) ends in a query how metaphor can really be degeneration when it is part of the process of seeing death as a part of life.

When metaphor says that one thing "is" another thing, or that a man, a woman and a blackbird are one (93), things are being identified *with* other things. In logical identity there is only identification *as*. If I say that the Queen of England "is" Elizabeth II, I have not identified one person with another, but one person as herself. Poetry also has this type of identification, for in poetic metaphor things are identified with each other, yet each is identified as itself, and retains that identity. When a man, a woman and a blackbird are said to be one, each remains what it is, and the identification heightens the distinctive form of each. Such a metaphor is necessarily illogical (or anti-logical, as in "A violent disorder is an order") and hence poetic metaphors are opposed to likeness or similarity. A perception that a man, a woman and a blackbird were in some respects alike would be logical, but would not make much of a poem. Unfortunately in prose speech we often use the word identical to mean very similar, as in the phrase "identical twins," and this use makes it difficult to express the idea of poetic identity in a prose essay. But if twins were really identical they would be the same person, and hence could be different in form, like a man and the same man as a boy of seven. A world of total simile, where everything was like everything else, would be a world of total monotony; a world of total metaphor, where everything is identified as itself and with everything else, would be a world where subject and object, reality and mental organization of reality, are one. Such a world of total metaphor is the formal cause of poetry. Stevens makes it clear that the poet seeks the particular and discrete image: many of the poems in *Parts of a World*, such as "On the Road Home" (203), express what the title of the book expresses, the uniqueness of every act of vision. Yet it is through the particular and discrete that we reach the unity of the imagination, which respects individuality, in contrast to the logical unity of the generaliz-

ing reason, which destroys it. The false unity of the dominating mind is what Stevens condemns in "The Bagatelles the Madrigals" (213), and in the third part of "The Pure Good of Theory" (331-2), where we find again a pejorative use of the term metaphor.

When a thing is identified as itself, it becomes an individual of a class or total form: when we identify a brown and green mass as a tree we provide a class name for it. This is the relating of species to genera which Aristotle spoke of as one of the central aspects of metaphor. The distinctively poetic use of such metaphor is the identifying of an individual with its class, where a tree becomes Wordsworth's "tree of many one," or a man becomes mankind. Poets ordinarily do not, like some philosophers, replace individual objects with their total forms; they do not, like allegorists, represent total forms by individuals. They see individual and class as metaphorically identical: in other words they work with *myths*, many of whom are human figures in whom the individual has been identified with its universal or total form.

Such myths, "archaic forms, giants Of sense, evoking one thing in many men" (494) play a large role in Stevens' imagery. For some reason he speaks of the myth as "abstract." "The Ultimate Poem is Abstract" (429; cf. 270, 223 and elsewhere), and the first requirement of the "supreme fiction" is that it must be abstract (380), though as far as dictionary meanings are concerned one would expect rather to hear that it must be concrete. By abstract Stevens apparently means artificial in its proper sense, something constructed rather than generalized. In such a passage as this we can see the myth forming out of "repetitions" as the individual soldier becomes the unknown soldier, and the unknown soldier the Adonis or continuously martyred god:

*How red the rose that is the soldier's wound,
The wounds of many soldiers, the wounds of all
The soldiers that have fallen, red in blood,
The soldier of time grown deathless in great size. (318)*

Just as there is false metaphor, so there is false myth. There is in particular the perverted myth of the average or "root-man" (262), described more expressively as "the total man of glubbal glub" (301). Whenever we have the root-man we have, by compensation, "The super-man friseured, possessing and possessed"

(262), which is the perversion of the idea of *Übermenschlichkeit* (98) into the Carlylean great man or military hero. Wars are in their imaginative aspect a "gigantomachia" (289) of competing aggressive myths. The war-myth or hero of death is the great enemy of the imagination: he cannot be directly fought except by another war-myth; he can only be contained in a greater and more genuine form of the same myth (280, section xv). The genuine form of the war-hero is the "major man" (334; 387-8) who, in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," is personified as peace (434), the direct opposite of the war-hero, and the third of the figures in "the mythology of modern death" which, along with sleep and memory, conquer death for life.

We thus arrive at the conception of a universal or "central man" (250), who may be identified with any man, such as a fisherman listening to wood-doves:

*The fisherman might be the single man
In whose breast, the dove, alighting, would grow still. (357)*

This passage, which combines the myth of the central man with the anima myth of the "dove in the belly" (366), is from a poem with the painfully exact title, "Thinking of a Relation between the Images of Metaphors." The central man is often symbolized by glass or transparency, as in "Asides on the Oboe" (250) and in "Prologues to What is Possible" (515). If there is a central man, there is also a central mind (298) of which the poet feels peculiarly a part. Similarly there is a "central poem" (441) identical with the world, and finally a "general being or human universe" (378), of which all imaginative work forms part:

*That's it. The lover writes, the believer hears,
The poet mumbles and the painter sees,
Each one, his fated eccentricity,
As a part, but part, but tenacious particle,
Of the skeleton of the ether, the total
Of letters, prophecies, perceptions, clods
Of color, the giant of nothingness, each one
And the giant ever changing, living in change. (443)*

In "Sketch of the Ultimate Politician" (335) we get a glimpse of this human universe as an infinite City of Man.

To sum up: the imaginative act breaks down the separation

between subject and object, the perceiver shut up in "the enclosures of hypothesis" (516) like an embryo in a "naked egg" (173) or glass shell (297), and a perceived world similarly imprisoned in the remoteness of its "irreducible X" (*N.A.* 83), which is also an egg (490). Separation is then replaced by the direct, primitive identification which Stevens ought to have called metaphor and which, not having a word for it, he calls "description" (339) in one of his definitive poems, a term to which he elsewhere adds "apotheosis" (378) and "transformation" (514; cf. *N.A.* 49), which come nearer to what he really means. The maxim that art should conceal art is based on the sense that in the greatest art we have no sense of manipulating, posing or dominating over nature, but rather of emancipating it. "One confides in what has no Concealed creator" (296), the poet says, and again:

*There might be, too, a change immenser than
A poet's metaphors in which being would
Come true, a point in the fire of music where
Dazzle yields to a clarity and we observe,
And observing is completing and we are content,
In a world that shrinks to an immediate whole,
That we do not need to understand, complete
Without secret arrangements of it in the mind. (341)*

The theoretical postulate of Stevens' poetry is a world of total metaphor, where the poet's vision may be identified with anything it visualizes. For such poetry the most accurate word is apocalyptic, a poetry of "revelation" (344) in which all objects and experiences are united with a total mind. Such poetry gives us:

*... the book of reconciliation,
Book of a concept only possible
In description, canon central in itself,
The thesis of the plentifullest John. (345)*

Apocalypse, however, is one of the two great narrative myths that expand "reality," with its categories of time and space, into an infinite and eternal world. A myth of a total man recovering a total world is hardly possible without a corresponding myth of a Fall, or some account of what is wrong with our present per-

spective. Stevens' version of the Fall is similar to that of the "Orphic poet" at the end of Emerson's *Nature*:

*Why, then, inquire
Who has divided the world, what entrepreneur?
No man. The self, the chrysalis of all men
Became divided in the leisure of blue day
And more, in branchings after day. One part
Held fast tenaciously in common earth
And one from central earth to central sky
And in moonlit extensions of them in the mind
Searched out such majesty as it could find. (468-9)*

Such poetry sounds religious, and in fact does have the infinite perspective of religion, for the limits of the imagination are the conceivable, not the real, and it extends over death as well as life. In the imagination the categories of "reality," space and time, are reversed into form and creation respectively, for art is "Description without Place" (339) standing at the centre of "ideal time" (*N.A.* 88), and its poetry is "even older than the ancient world" (*N.A.* 145). Religion seems to have a monopoly of talking about infinite and eternal worlds, and poetry that uses such conceptions seems to be inspired by a specifically religious interest. But the more we study poetry, the more we realize that the dogmatic limiting of the poet's imagination to human and subhuman nature that we find, for instance, in Hardy and Housman, is not normal to poetry but a technical *tour de force*. It is the normal language of poetic imagination itself that is heard when Yeats says that man has invented death; when Eliot reaches the still point of the turning world; when Rilke speaks of the poet's perspective as that of an angel containing all time and space, blind and looking into himself; when Stevens finds his home in "The place of meta-men and para-things" (448). Such language may or may not go with a religious commitment: in itself it is simply poetry speaking as poetry must when it gets to a certain pitch of metaphorical concentration. Stevens says that his motive is neither "to console Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound" (389).

In *Harmonium*, published in the Scott Fitzgerald decade, Stevens moves in a highly sensuous atmosphere of fine pictures, good food, exquisite taste and luxury cruises. In the later poems, though the writing is as studiously oblique as ever, the sensuousness has

largely disappeared, and the reader accustomed only to *Harmonium* may feel that Stevens' inspiration has failed him, or that he is attracted by themes outside his capacity, or that the impact of war and other ironies of the autumnal vision has shut him up in an uncommunicative didacticism. Such a view of Stevens is of course superficial, but the critical issue it raises is a genuine one.

In the criticism of drama there is a phase in which the term "theatrical" becomes pejorative, when one tries to distinguish genuine dramatic imagination from the conventional clichés of dramatic rhetoric. Of course eventually this pejorative use has to disappear, because Shakespeare and Aeschylus are quite as theatrical as Cecil de Mille. Similarly, one also goes through a stage, though a shorter one, in which the term "poetic" may acquire a slightly pejorative cast, as when one may decide, several hundred pages deep in Swinburne, that Swinburne can sometimes be a poetic bore. Eventually one realizes that the "poetic" quality comes from allusiveness, the incorporating into the texture of echoes, cadences, names and thoughts derived from the author's previous literary experience. Swinburne is poetic in a poor sense when he is being a parasite on the literary tradition; Eliot is poetic in a better sense when, in his own phrase, he steals rather than imitates. The "poetic" normally expresses itself as what one might loosely call word-magic or incantation, charm in its original sense of spell, as it reinforces the "act of the mind" in poetry with the dream-like reverberations, echoes and enlarged significances of the memory and the unconscious. We suggested at the beginning that Eliot lacks what Stevens has, the sense of an autonomous poetic theory as an inseparable part of poetic practice. On the other hand Eliot has pre-eminently the sense of a creative tradition, and this sense is partly what makes his poetry so uniquely penetrating, so easy to memorize unconsciously.

In Stevens there is a good deal of incantation and imitative harmony; but the deliberately "magical" poems, such as "The Idea of Order at Key West," "To the One of Fictive Music," and the later "Song of Fixed Accord" have the special function of expressing a stasis or harmony between imagination and reality, and hence have something of a conscious rhetorical exercise about them. In "The Idea of Order at Key West" the sense of carefully controlled artifice enters the theme as well. In other poems where the texture is dryer and harder, the schemata on which "word-magic" depends are reduced to a minimum. The

rhymes, for instance, when they occur, are usually sharp barking assonances, parody-rhymes (e.g., "The Swedish cart to be part of the heart," 369), and the metres, like the curious blank *terza rima* used so often, are almost parody-metres. A quality that is not far from being anti-"poetic" seems to emerge.

Just as the "poetic" is derived mainly from the reverberations of tradition, so it is clear that the anti-"poetic" quality in Stevens is the result of his determination to make it new, in Pound's phrase, to achieve in each poem a unique expression and force his reader to make a correspondingly unique act of apprehension. This is a part of what he means by "abstract" as a quality of the "supreme fiction." It was Whitman who urged American writers to lay less emphasis on tradition, thereby starting another tradition of his own, and it is significant that Whitman is one of the very few traditional poets Stevens refers to, though he has little in common with him technically. It is partly his sense of a poem as belonging to experiment rather than tradition, separated from the stream of time with its conventional echoes, that gives Stevens' poetry its marked affinity with pictures, an affinity shown also in the curiously formalized symmetry of the longer poems. "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction," for instance, has three parts of ten sections each, each section with seven tercets, and similarly rectangular distributions of material are found in other poems.

When we meet a poet who has so much rhetorical skill, and yet lays so much emphasis on novelty and freshness of approach, the skill acquires a quality of courage: a courage that is without compromise in a world full of cheap rhetoric, yet uses none of the ready-made mixes of rhetoric in a world full of compromise. Stevens was one of the most courageous poets of our time, and his conception of the poem as "the heroic effort to live expressed As victory" (446) was unyielding from the beginning. Courage implies persistence, and persistence in a distinctive strain often develops its complementary opposite as well, as with Blake's fool who by persisting in his folly became wise. It was persistence that transformed the tropical lushness of *Harmonium* into the austere clairvoyance of *The Rock*, the luxurious demon into the necessary angel, and so rounded out a vision of major scope and intensity. As a result Stevens became, unlike many others who may have started off with equal abilities, not one of our expendable rhetoricians, but one of our small handful of essential poets.

LOUIS SIMPSON

The Bird

“Ich wünscht’, ich wäre ein Vöglein,”
Sang Heinrich, “I would fly
Across the sea . . . ” so sadly
It made his mother cry.

At night he played his zither,
By day worked in the mine.
His friend was Hans; together
The boys walked by the Rhine.

“Each day we’re growing older,”
Hans said, “This is no life.
I wish I were a soldier!”
And snapped his pocket-knife.

War came, and Hans was taken,
But Heinrich did not fight.
“Ich wünscht’, ich wäre ein Vöglein,”
Sang Heinrich every night.

“Dear Heinrich,” said the letter,
“I hope this finds you fine.
The war could not be better,
It’s women, song and wine.”

A letter came for Heinrich,
The same that he’d sent East
To Hans, his own hand-writing
Returned, and marked *Deceased*.

*

“You’ll never be a beauty,”
The doctor said, “You scamp!
We’ll give you special duty—
A concentration camp.”

And now the truck was nearing
The place. They passed a house;
A radio was blaring
The *Wiener Blut* of Strauss.

The banks were bright with flowers,
The birds sang in the wood;
There was a fence with towers
On which armed sentries stood.

They stopped. The men dismounted;
Heinrich got down . . . at last!
"That chimney," said the sergeant,
"That's where the Jews are gassed."

*

Each day he sorted clothing,
Skirt, trousers, boot and shoe,
Till he was filled with loathing
For every size of Jew.

"Come in! What is it, Private?"
"Please Sir, that vacancy . . .
I wonder, could I have it?"
"Your papers! Let me see . . .

"You're steady and you're sober . . .
But have you learned to kill?"
Said Heinrich, "No, Herr Ober-
Leutnant, but I will!"

"The Reich can use your spirit.
Report to Unit Four.
Here is an arm-band—wear it!
Dismissed! Don't slam the door."

*

"Ich wünscht', ich wäre ein Vöglein,"
Sang Heinrich, "I would fly . . ."
They knew that when they heard him
The next day they would die.

They stood in silence praying
At midnight when they heard
The zither softly playing,
The singing of the Bird.

He stared into the fire,
He sipped a glass of wine.
"Ich wünscht'," his voice rose higher,
"Ich wäre ein Vöglein . . . "

A dog howled in its kennel,
He thought of Hans and cried.
The stars looked down from heaven.
That day the children died.

*

"The Russian tanks are coming!"
The wind bore from the East
A cannonade, a drumming
Of small arms that increased.

Heinrich went to Headquarters.
He found the Colonel dead
With pictures of his daughters,
A pistol by his head.

He thought, his courage sinking,
"There's always the SS . . . "
He found the Major drinking
In a woman's party dress.

The prisoners were shaking
Their barracks. Heinrich heard
A sound of timber breaking,
A shout, "Where is the Bird?"

*

The Russian was completing
A seven-page report.
He wrote: "We still are beating
The woods . . . " then he stopped short.

A little bird was flitting
 Outside, from tree to tree.
 He turned where he was sitting
 And watched it thoughtfully.

He pulled himself together,
 And wrote: "We've left no stone
 Unturned—but not a feather!
 It seems the Bird has flown.

"Description? Half a dozen
 Group snapshots, badly blurred;
 And which is Emma's cousin
 God knows, and which the Bird!

"He could be in the Western
 Or in the Eastern Zone.
 I'd welcome a suggestion
 If anything is known."

*

"Ich wünscht', ich wäre ein Vöglein,"
 Sings Heinrich, "I would fly
 Across the sea," so sadly
 It makes his children cry.

Orpheus in America

Here are your meadows, Love, as wide as heaven,
 Green spirits, leaves
 And winds, your ministers!

Item: a ship, that on the outer shoals
 Lies broken. Item: thirty-seven souls,
 Or rather, thirty-seven kinds of fever.
 Item: three Indians, chained leg to leg.
 Item: my lute.

This is the New England, rocks and brush
Where none may live but only tigers, parrots,
And mute imagining . . .
America, a desert with a name.

America begins antiquity.
Confronted with pure space, my Arcady
Has turned to stone.
Rome becomes Rome; Greece, Greece; the cottages
Collapse in ruin.

It darkens like a lapse of memory.
Here are no palaces, but lifted stone,
The pyramids of Egypt, steles
Of Ur. Columns that death has set
At the entrance to his kingdom.

This gazing freedom is the basilisk.
O for a mirror!
The melancholy of the possible
Unmeasures me.

Courts must be cool; the airs
That keep the lion and the serpent tranced
Are temperate.

Hedges be clipped. My girl
Limps over splinters. Rhymes
Fall on deaf ears. There are too many trees
For poetry.

In the wood it was his purpose to destroy
In order to build the city of his poems
Orpheus touched his instrument in silence.

DANIEL G. HOFFMAN

From "Taliesin"

All Nature's secrets
Became my ken
Not through cunning.
Caridwen
Set hands of Gwion's
To stir her soup
Of Inspiration, Science,
And Grace. One drop
Of each splashed my thumb,
Pain made me taste;
Gwion's become
Taliesin,
"Radiant brow,"
Who till now
Was unlearned and chaste.

Once out of nature
Man shall never take
Solace or self-measure
Nor shall he slake
His prodigious thirst
To swill her broth,
Chew grounds for treasure.
Famished for power or honour
Some gulped Inspiration,
Some Science, some both.
I who nothing sought
By thumb's unlucky thrust
Drew a richer draught.
Of all I was given,
I would I were shriven.

Taliesin's Revelations

*

Someday, perhaps, the race will go
Both to the swift and to the slow.
Then we shall find that great belief
Round Stonehenge chaunted long ago,
Before the mind and heart to grief
Did fall because man willed it so.

Caridwen, be my Muse; my theme,
How man, born out of beasts' embrace
To stride toward death, wills to redeem
His days by intellect and grace,
And finds, where buds and maggots teem
In the ceaseless sun, his natural place.

* *

Gold for the goosegirl—
That's a generous song.
Transgresses accustomed deprivations,
But love's not powerless. A wrong
Descried against appearance?
These waddling fowl detain
One whose most casual motion proves
How ineluctable is beauty's reign;

A wrong against reality:
Her slender shoulder, in repose,
Shames all professions of regality
That call her less. These gold-wrought shoes
Are hers! Who casts such beauty down
Contra naturam I defy his wrong.
Lady, for whose love I'll dare all,
—Out of my way, geese—I bring thee song.

* *

* * *

Who brings idealization
 to this rock?
 The hand that held the hammer?
 the calculable blows it struck,
 Or the life whose realization
 is here intensified?

What image or imagining

This stone reflects
 of man, who brings into his art
 Magnificence, or resplendency
 of art brings to his acts.

*

* *

* * *

You dispraise my vision in that moral sense
 Should not a horseback warlike man select
 For an apothegm in stone?
 You, then, would instead erect
 A mirror to the multitudes of love
 And liberally reject
 All reflection that man's violence
 Has to do with what perfection
 He is capable of?

Were I who have endured my age too long to wait
 For Adam's second coming without lust
 I might envision the wholly perfect state.
 For love I praise with all my passion
 But do distrust
 Moral rhetoric gorged on abnegation.
 The knowledge burnt into my brain is that
 Perfect justice is unjust;
 I deal in nature, and accommodate
 All that seethes in blood and must.
 Perfection I proclaim as what

Passion and discipline create
 When necessity and joy adjust
 What's possible to the moral sense.
 I'll stand requital for what wrongs
 My horseman does to excellence
 When states are made as well as songs.

* *
 * * *
 * *

This wind in the wool
 Tickles shepherd and sheep;
 Its itch roils their sleep.
 Whoever scratches is mortal.

 * * *
 * * * *
 *

Do I speak truth
 Then let this breath deny
 As much of death
 As any man can. I
 My burnt tongue's gift bequeath
 To you in whom my speech
 Or song moves most:
 Act, enact the myth
 Of man the maker: Reach
 In every syllable
 Of your life, in each
 Motion of your soul
 As though these dreams my ghost
 Long since made were real;
 Such magnificence you touch
 Shall your self become.
 At the portal of your feast
 I sing, though dust be dumb:
 Praise the immortal host,
 Mortal encomium.

LYSANDER KEMP

Odysseus

He is an old man, old I think as the lizard,
Or birdlike, or like the lizard wrinkled and spry,
But idle now in the long grasses by the river,
With birds in the sky, birds in the willow plumes
For company and for song. He smiles, refusing
To ponder marvels, horrors and disorders,
Fingering a green pebble for its wisdom.
I finger my old scars. I am sick of heroics,
I banish the dead, the captains among the dead,
The heroes among the ghosts. I too was a hero,
I foiled the machinations of the wicked.
Molos said, "We sail at the crack of day,
Or at noon, or when he remembers, if he remembers,"
But I subdued the wicked, swinging my sword,
The blood broke like rainfall from their ruin!
Courage and craft. She too was clever, weaving,
Deceiving . . . And here I sit, and there she sits,
Old now, she with her moustache, I with my tits.

Now of my five and failing wits, the four
Dissemble, only my half-blind eyes can please me,
Giving for love a memory or a vision,
A white circle of girls in their white chitons—
Was it at morning, in the hardening light?—
All white as sea-foam on the sea-green grass,
All dancing, dancing, white against the green—
Or was it at evening, in the dissolving light?—
Or a dream I have forgotten? I have forgotten.

But I have remembered decency like beauty.
Drums and heroics, the gold coin struck in my honor,
In these days I will swap the lot for a little
Decency. Fury flocks together, fury
Is three, all monstrous. One is a catlike body
With bat wings and a rat skull without skin,
The lank hair seeps from the bone. She is Alecto.

Two is a toadlike body with gorecrow wings
And the head of a golden serpent. She is Megaera.
Three is a ferretlike body with hawk wings
And the head of a turtle. She is Tisiphone.
All three are deathless. Only the dead escape them,
The decent suffer. Great Prometheus suffers
For bringing us fire from heaven out of his decency,
Chained to the cliff where the furies, not a vulture,
Teacher was wrong, are tearing at his vitals.
I whispered to Meno, "He has guts," and we snickered,
I was a fool of a schoolboy, drip at the snout,
Our hero was Biton the Lummo, heroic torso
Larger than life but capped with the head of a gnat.
The clever Odysseus! The hero! It seems the mind
Wisens at last within the rotting hulk
Too late, it is too late to forget or remember.

The day Troy fell, and the day after, the wind
Swirled the dust of the plain across the city.
It was a shroud. The day we sailed, a little
Spiral of wind picked up a peck of dust,
Whirled it against me, then collapsed and dropped it.
The sea was clean, the sea wind cleaned us at first,
The dolphins romped beside us in the glittering
Waters, like the dolphin on my shield.
Later, they swam away. Our ship, infested
With heroes, dropped her sail in Circe's harbor.
We rowed her in across the glooming waves,
The keel grined on the beach. I laugh when I think
Of Circe's magic. We stank like dead Troy,
My beard was foul and my crotch was foul and my armpits
Reeked from the long voyage. Where is the magic
In changing a herd of swine to a herd of swine?

How the mind wanders! We wandered. Grateful Ithaca
Struck a gold coin in my honor: I am a hero.
Heroes, it is said, after they die, live,
The air about them there is clean as the sea wind,
All is beauty, all is decency. Hermes,
Whether it is or is not, come, Hermes, god
Of wanderers, guide of the dead, come lead me down.

In Mexico

How could I sleep, with the midnight serenade
Two streets away, in the barrio of The Bell,
And that mosquito hunting the Aztec night?
In my own country, all dunes, moors and beaches,
There is no music at night but the tide's adagio,
The tide's andante, depending upon the wind,
But at noon in the rank eel-grass of Boat Meadow,
There were such swarming swirls of mosquitoes once,
Before I was born but old Doane remembered,
That if you slapped the flank of your horse, your hand
Was a dripping smear of blood. Go get some water,
And wash this filthy witness from your hand.

How could I sleep, with that creature crying for blood,
Hunting the night in the country of the sun?
They plucked the heart out pulsing. Witness of what?
I heard its dark cry drown the serenade,
And a voice cried Sleep no more! and the creature struck.
I struck. The blood it bled was mine. I slept.
I think my thoughts are all emotions here,
Confused by the sun and the memories out of this earth,
And without thought I wonder whether Dolores
Was right or wrong in the morning, turning, the broom
In her dark hands, when she said, How good it is
To fall asleep to music over the housetops.

The Ballad of Catarino Maravillas

After the Spanish of Miguel Lira

Catarino Maravillas
Crossed the sea at night,
Crossed the sea to Cuba
After the long fight.

He was a stranger in Cuba,
He crossed the sea at night
Because the word in Mexico
Was: Shoot Maravillas on sight.

He fought for Madero first,
Now there was a good man,
Hooray for Pancho Madero
And Don Aquiles Serdán!

But they shot Francisco Madero,
It was a crime he died,
Catarino Maravillas
Fought at Zapata's side.

He wore a wide sombrero,
He dressed in peasant white,
He ploughed a field on the mountain,
With time out to fight.

But they shot Emiliano Zapata,
It was a crime he died,
Catarino Maravillas
Fought at Carranza's side.

Sunday the blue sierra,
Monday the salt sea.
Battle from Tuesday morning
Till Friday at half-past three.
Saturday white and quiet,
Sleeping under a tree.

But they shot Venustiano Carranza,
It was a crime he died,
Catarino Maravillas
Fought at Villa's side.

Battle of Las Palomas,
Battle of El Capulín,
Twenty leagues on horseback,
Twenty-one on the train.

Now gallop, my little horse,
Though you will never arrive;
Gallop, gallop, little horse,
You can never rest while alive.

But they shot Francisco Villa,
It was a crime he died,
Catarino Maravillas
Came back from the countryside.

Back to the presidential peace
Of the city where banners flew
Over the National Palace
And the great Arcades too.
Back to the Zócalo where
The worst tempest blew.

Catarino Maravillas
Was Mexico to the bone,
On the 15th of September
He shouted, Hooray for our own
Virgin of Guadalupe
And General Obregón!

But they shot Álvaro Obregón,
It was a crime he died,
Catarino Maravillas
Decided to decide.

It was a bright white morning,
Maravillas boarded the train,
Rode all day to the north
And never came back again.

He crossed the sea to Havana
But he dreams of sailing back,
Catarino Maravillas
Dreams of retreat and attack.
Catarino Maravillas,
Catarino Maravillas
Dreams of the next Revolution.

JAMES WRIGHT

The Revelation

Stress of his anger set me back
To musing over time and space.
The apple branches dripping black
Divided light across his face.
Towering beneath the broken tree,
He seemed a stony shade to me.
He spoke no language I could hear
For long with my distracted ear.

Between his lips and my delight
In blowing wind, a bird-song rose.
And soon in fierce, blockading light
The planet's shadow hid his face.
And all that strongly molded bone
Of chest and shoulder soon were gone,
Devoured among the solid shade.
Assured his angry voice was dead,

And satisfied his judging eyes
Had given over plaguing me,
I stood to let the darkness rise—
My darkness, gathering in the tree,
The field, the swollen shock of hay,
Bank of the creek half washed away.
Lost in my self, and unaware
Of love, I took the evening air.

I blighted, for a moment's length,
My father out of sight and sound;
Prayed to annihilate his strength,
The proud legs planted on the ground.
Why should I hear his angry cry
Or bear the damning of his eye?
Anger for anger I could give,
And murder for my right to live.

The moon rose. Lucidly the moon
Ran skimming shadows off the trees,
To strip all shadow but its own
Down to the perfect mindlessness.
Yet suddenly the moonlight caught
My father's fingers reaching out,
The strong arm begging me for love,
Loneliness I knew nothing of.

And weeping in the nakedness
Of moonlight and of agony,
His blue eyes lost their barrenness
And bore a blossom out to me.
And as I ran to give it back,
The apple branches, dripping black,
Trembled across the lunar air
And dropped white petals on his hair.

A Balm for Easy Tears

First of the fair to weep
Or, of the ugly, last,
She turned her face from me.
Leaves in the light fell past
The window and the tree.
The world rolled in its sleep.

I raised my hand to hold
Her shoulder; comforter
I was before I knew.
She sniffled, half aware
Of false grief and the true.
Tears ran; she was not old.

For the old bend down and hack
Their grief out on the earth.
Their eyes are all dried out

Like stone pools in a drouth.
Comforting hands too late
Console them through the dark.

So as that startled girl
Sat down by me to cry
The mockery of her friends,
Sorry she would not die
Before all weeping ends,
I remembered the high wall

Where David, racked on years,
Lay out of sight and heard
The innocent lookout sing
Of two men running hard
Over the sands to bring
The majestic gift of tears;

Where Joab knelt and gave
What David long had known,
Beaten, and known again:
His own rebellious son
Crushed beyond curse or pain,
Left arid in a grave;

Where David's cold despair
Led him beyond the crowd
Of dancing girls and drums,
And he suddenly cried aloud
For the rain that never comes:
Above the world's dry noise,
Absalom's flowering voice
Showered on the desert air.

Remembering that, I told
The girl to snifle on,
Tears being cheap enough,
And life so quickly gone.
I told her, out of love,
To go home, and grow old.

Merlin Buried in Moonlight

Tonight the cold magician stirs alive
And hears the water leaping up the shore.
His eyes explore the lids, he holds a hand
Out to the wall. Though buried under sand,
He knows the soft halloo of gulls, the roar
Of crest and shallow lapping at the cave.
What is it moves him down the buried grave
To shiver his gray bones, to cry for air?
There was a woman in the West whose mouth
Burned richer than a wounded plum in drouth.
Tonight the wizard shudders for his love;
He feels her wailing, as the waters move.

The moon, molding the pale foam skyward, fills
The shore with a dancing girl, the light blown dark
And light again from ferries and the hills
Of wave. The old man, scratching in the rock,
Loved the white arms uplifted from a lake;
He spurned the magic of the air, to wave
And charm the moon waterward for her sake.
Her throat's blue hollow lured him to a grave;
He heard her laughter as she left.

A ghost

Dances up darkly on the beach, and takes
Notice of no more than the moon gone down.
Poor Merlin, withering, that voice you hear
Is more illusion from the moon. No more
Than other laughing women does she bear
An old man's bitten lips along the shore.
And even were the chain, the granite wall,
The bowed cage of the heart itself, to fall
And free you naked on the beach for her,
You would kiss rock. There is no woman there:
Only a thin light teasing a lost boat,
A homeless dog, a beer can still afloat,
Tossed at the low tide by some fisherman.
Drop back asleep; or see, before you drown,
Far off, the moon's white cities burning down.

JOHN FANDEL

Observations at Aquidneck

I

Were the world always morning,
How should I be, at Noon, taller by shadow;
Were spring forever spring,
When could I tell the apple from the blossom;
So if I wait an ever before the gate,
I shall not brave the splendor of the garden.
There is a dark that stars may flower;
A sun of reaping, a rain for sowing;
The time of time, and the ever after.
These things I know; I think I know these things
As I can see the sky, can hear the larks'
Extravagance; or do I think I touch
Adventure of the root within the aster,
The start of stars: to be: that delicate courage.
Do I breathe. Do I move. Am I what I am.
Heart, heart, heart. Heart,
Timid gold tick on the verge of the sun,
Brief sparrow in the leaves of the hurricane:
A gull, this morning, like an inland tide,
Scouted the hills, swooped to a nested meadow,
Waded in slender clover where I stood,
And seemed to listen to a lark I heard
From the beginning of the world, then rose
On whiter wings than all the wind toward sea,
Fading until his wisdom blinded me,
As I was deafened in the singing lark
By the small holy Niagara of the pulse.

II

I had expected the full moon,
A white advent, a round moment,

To close my eyes with its occurrence.
I waited in simple breath for the moon full
As the earlier sun making a second world,
Being so bright, the universe could not hide it.
I waited for the moon to use my window
In a room dark as sleep where I waited sleep
On sheets narrow as hands. When the rain began,
Announcing itself like a fresh kind of cricket,
Faintly necessary on the broad leaves,
On the shingles, on the flat stones in the garden,
And then on itself until it chastened
The whole universe; stones and shingles and leaves
Faded with the usual crickets
That I had listened to almost without listening.
I did not know if they had ceased, or whether
Contending with the rain evoked their silence.
Only silence vanquished the surprise of rain
That reigned until I could not hear the rain.
Sometimes it rains so hard we cannot hear it,
As a tall waterfall absolves itself.
Then, silence, silent as silent sleep.
I could not hear my heart, my pulse; my breath,
As if I were not breathing, breathed.
I guessed how the world began in a similar moment
Before sun, moon, and rain, before sleep.

III

Day unto day, night unto night,
Sun unto moon and moon unto sun,
Seed and flower, blossom and fruit,
Spring unto age, youth unto fall;
The miracle of Now stands Host
At our hearth, stone heart, burning
Within our need for his charity
As we sigh at the rock embers of tomorrow
This morning, this paradise of the sun,
Tonight's moon, day unto day unto day.
Each sun of the pulse, each moon of the breath,

Morning of time and forever
Sleeps in the roots of the body.
So when I saw the blue flower
On a morning of storm and dark
Within and without, I stopped to look
Down at that sky as if I were its sun,
And, there, became a sun, my golden blood
Starting under the cloud its rift
Of heaven in thunder, sudden
As blue in a sky grey
Cold; and I touched at the start of a world,
I stood at a gate of the garden,
Elysian to the roots of the flower
That drained into its roots my hidden sun,
And flowered it; and I walked on,
Moon of my own sun in the splendid rain.

LEONARD WOLF

Florentine Easter

Whose creed is this, where, narrowly, the bells
Implore for peace inside a city? Shades
And palaces confused with darkness, spill
Among the stones and penitents. The dead,

The dead come up like dusty pallbearers
To ape the living; labor in their sleep
To be alive, but hurried from their graves
They hunt salvation, like their baptisms, cheap.

Intent to pray, and in battalions, swift,
They swoop on Florence. Let the city, hard,
Cling to its turrets, and the priests maintain
More perfect vigils, and their chapels guard

Against the dead who pray. O, terrible
Their voices when awake; how, in a dream
Shall they be gentle, who, incredible,
Speak like the swaying artifacts they seem.

The sleepers rage and cross themselves alive.
They murmur "deus" like a curse profound
Or *pace, pace*, until wild, they shake
The shutters desperate for a living sound.

Confusion whispers in the cobblestones
At Easter time. The living speak no ill
Of the defiling dead. The creed absolves
The moving only, while the dead hold still.

Florentine Easter II

1. The city of Florence, in the marble seen
Palazzos shows; and sunlight, ponderous
As massive gold, shines heavily between
Red balustrades. In alleys, perilous
With beauty, Cleveland glows, a nebulous
And distant structure in Italian air;
A reasonable town, not dangerous
At Easter time. Its traveller, shy, takes care
Of Florence with its God and His imposing snare.
2. The city of Florence is a broken stone
That shines in fragments on the Arno plain.
A ruined crypt that may be looked upon
By any tourist at the risk of pain.
The godless Clevelander, in towers, vain
With the besotted vanity of years
Explores the wreck of the intense inane.
The city, printed on a card, brings tears;
Its print in stone brings love and grave religious fears.

3. He wants no god. In Florence where he turns
Are mumbling priests, and on the butchers' hooks
Hang lambs adorned with roses. Florence burns
The thickest incense; prints the fairest books
Of prayer for her cathedrals. There, Christ looks
Compassion crudely from a monument,
And cherubs, grimy in their dusty nooks
Adore him, simpering, from a pediment
Where all the knees of Florence in his praise are bent.
4. Who eats this eats wrath, or perfect life,
Or else the crumbs that fall from it betray
The baker's weakness or the baker's wife
Who makes thin wafers that too soon decay.
The Clevelander is glad the rich array
Before the altar's tarnished, and a rent
Is in the altar cloth. He tastes the clay
That's in the bread and knows no God is pent
In musty wafers waiting with malign intent.
5. The queen of Sheba is another queen!
But Christ in Florence is an emperor, wan,
Denied her presence. Busy Florentines
Have time to watch her, and her purple swan
Making their progress. Who has looked upon
That negro lady with her leopard's eyes
May not be saved. Unless his soul outrun,
With heaven's help, her Abyssinian sighs
He'll trip in luxury, and lose his paradise.
6. Imagination's paradox. To sin
Where we adore, and by remote decree
To maim the God we have salvation in.
The north is brutal; from the nearest tree
The Norsemen hang him; in the south, we see
Him hanging gently. From his side, a dew
Like ichor flowing, while humility
In every picture more intense than true
Sustains him where he hangs, his palms pierced through and
through.

7. He'll have no gods; the Cleveland tourist, now
A wide-eyed truant from a safer shore
Is still erect. No image sees him bow,
Except his head, rebelliously, before
The beautiful. His lips will not implore
A resurrection. Swiftly, swiftly flows
The stream of his impiety. The more
The church in satin and in triumph goes
The deeper roils his current and more fierce it grows.
8. The traveller lives in Cleveland O. How shall
He bear such knowledge gracefully; he stands
Amazed before these icons that appall
His reason. Yet his intellect commands
Lake Erie's troubled and ungracious strands
Without much shock. There, limestone slakes the ore
Unhelped by attitudes of praying hands.
In Florence, it makes fountains from which pour
Out streams of grace and glory at the church's door.
9. Die down! The church is a presumption torn
Out of the mouths of babes. Belief must die,
And prayer too. He's bought a missal, worn
By an Italian hand, whose pages lie
In soft black letter to his heart and eye,
And lovely, with the classic innocence
Of lies that are believed. Abashed, he'll buy
Tomorrow, on the grain of a pretence,
A gaudy rosary and count him out of sense.
10. Why will the stones rise up and Duomo build
Whose source is beauty, peril and decay?
Poor Clevelander; he's busy, and has filled
His notebooks sternly for a later day
When his emotions, after long delay
And recollected, like a dream appear
Which there impelled him, while he could, to pray
Away from Cleveland. In a single year,
He will deny that too; and he denies it here.

Equinox

Nothing that breaks so well as equinox
The heart's imagination. Twice she locks
Up time with the precision of a god
Confining darkness with a vicious rod
And holding light at bay; a tiger matched
Against a panther, black; and neither scratched
An inch beyond the other, neither loose,
Both throttling equally in her strait noose.

The heart is cleft before such majesty
That dares to balance time; that dares to see
The brilliant and the dark rebel in vain.
Twice she masters them with the hot pain
Of justice, and with tension mutes their laws
Until she slips and they resume their claws.

Sonnet

Sits by a fireplace, the seducer talks
Of trouble in the heart, until he weeps
Before the woman, virtuous, whose hand,
Soft and gentle, delicate and long
Marks a moment of compassion, when
His kiss falls on her, and a fury strikes
The two together to a frenzied sleep
Into a frenzied bed where pity writhes
With joy terrific, eloquent and fine
As that committed in a foreign land
Where no denials prosper. Pity sighs,
But hands, lips, murmurs, breasts and eyes
With pity into one compassion join
To pay the praises of the thievish groin.

A. R. AMMONS

Poem

Coming to a pinywoods
 where a stream darted across the path
like a squirrel or frightened blacksnake
I sat down on a sunny hillock
 and leaned back against a pine
and picked up some dry pineneedle bundles from the ground
and tore each bundle apart a needle at the time
 It was not Coulter's pine
 for *coulteri* is funnier looking
 and not Monterrey either
and I thought God must have had Linnaeus in mind
orders of trees correspond so well between them
'and I dropped to sleep wondering what design God
had meant the human mind to fit
 and looked up and saw a great bird
warming in the sun high on a pine limb
tearing from his breast golden feathers
 softer than new gold that
 dropped to the wind one or two
 gently and touched my face
I picked one up and it said
 The world is bright after rain
for rain washes death out of the land and hides it far
beneath the soil and it returns again cleansed with life
 and so all is a circle
and nothing is separable
The mind a loosely held bundle of sensibilities
 falls apart
 and rushes over the earth
 reforming in many places
Look at this noble pine from which you are
almost indistinguishable it is also sensible
 and cries out when it is felled
and so I said are plants blind and is the earth black to them

Oh I said if trees are blind
 I do not want to be a tree
A wind rising of *one in time* blowing the feather away
forsaken I woke
and the golden bird had flown away and the sun
had moved the shadows over me so I rose and walked on

Hymn

I know if I find you I will have to leave the earth
and go on out

 over the sea marshes and the brant in bays
and over the hills of tall hickory
and over the crater lakes and canyons
and on up through the spheres of diminishing air
past the blackset noctilucous clouds
 where one wants to stop and look
way past all the light diffusions and bombardments
up farther than the loss of sight
 into the unseasonal undifferentiated empty stark

And I know if I find you I will have to stay with the earth
inspecting with thin tools and ground eyes
trusting the microvilli sporangium and simplest
 coelenterate
and praying for a nerve cell
with all the soul of my chemical reactions
and going right on down where the eye sees only traces

You are everywhere partial and entire
You are on the inside of everything and on the outside

I walk down the path down the hill where the sweetgum
has begun to ooze spring sap at the cut
and I see how the bark cracks and winds like no other bark
chasmal to my ant-soul running up and down
and if I find you I must go out deep into your
 far resolutions
and if I find you I must stay here with the separate leaves

The Watch

When the sun went down and the night came on
coming over the fields and up the driveway
to the rose arbor and the backporch posts

I gathered myself together from dispersing dark
and went up into the mountains
and sitting down on the round rock beyond the trees

kindled my thoughts
blowing the coals of my day's bright conscious
and said

all across the plains my voice going silently and down
among the stumps where the swamp cuts through
and in between among the villages of the hill country

Now close your eyes

Sleep

Shut out the world from the dark sweet freshening
of your quiet hearts

Lie loose in the deep waters

Do not be afraid to

give yourselves up to drowning in undefended rest

If a dust storm blows up out of the West I will run
down the mountain and go through all the homes
and wake you up

If a new fire appears in the sky I will let you know
in time

so you can know it should it claim you

I will have all your beings in mind burning like a watchfire
and when the night has grown thin and weak
and the full coyotes have given up their calls

I will move up close to the eternal and
saying nine praises
commend you to it and to the coming sun

JAMES DICKEY

The Work of Art

Amputee Ward, Okinawa, 1945

There, burned
By imagination slowly

Out of the hulk of leaning,
The walls of the tent begin to glow.
His heartbeat continually fires
True, for his leg, and misses.
The wind blows the island on
Under a gentle shoulder of sun in the air.

An arm moves, filling temperately with land.
He says, with his head to the sand sheets,
"My courage is the inside of bright light,"
And a singled muscularity opens, in weight
Beginning to rain, a wildening space of God.
He steps back with his strange left foot
Into the blue-eyed floating of the soul.

On a skylight aging the smell of lawns,
The figures, in their stacked sparks
Of thread, are standing together.
Given the mica of their coats,
The hunters have gained, for years,
Their stiff, elected limbs;

The boar is stitched in fever from his life
Where the precious leaves have grouped his place.
The amassed geometer whispers
Into the sea, "The Lord of Tapestry is maimed."
His leg is mired to the thigh
In Creation, and lies on him breathing in threads.
"The Sword shall devour the Sun,
And there be no less light."

It hangs about him, all its rays
Constellated equal, killing its craftsmen with age.

He thinks the yeast of cloth is called
"Resurrection," death has everywhere so much
The shine of reliefless artistry.
In the place in him quivering dead in length
The shot threads are moored.

And when the Limb, resplendent
In castle-green and black,
In the God-eaten white of cloud
And the canvas-gold of bone implied
Through the scarlet spool of the wound,
Hangs deathlessly, and the work is given to men,
What of the man himself, when the leg shocks out its gilt
How deadly still, into the still museum?
How to say that its unfigured man,
Forgotten by the cloth, has not yet died;
Has but devoured

In sleep the thread of the labyrinth?
He shouts between two screams.
The bubble of color
Rings mindlessly, in answer.
A hunting wall of sun
Comes down on the veil of the amateur.

Shines, like a marsh, the sun
On the crossed brow of listening.
He beats his empty hands on his ears, and twists
All around his leg, white, edged gold, sewn flat
Beside a hooded falcon burned in grass.
A procession of knights and hunters
Is watched around him into cloth.
He feels the move among the craftsmen's minds
Pull him up terribly to sit,

Facing, over his seed-pearled leg
The green and blinding thicket of the boar.
He braces his free foot on the sheets

And reaches through the weaving-bright of stillness,
Ablaze with meditation in his arm.
The silver sun

Catches one turn of thread alive
About his thumb, and begins to fall,
Unravelling, falling through the woven world
Into an upraised blade.
He feels its snowing vibrancy
Create his hand, its jewels hilt his palm, the blade
Shimmer in the bodiless stone of air:
The whole cloth burning and swinging, he yells,
"Pour la Reine," and brings it down,
Halving the green blaze, rippling
Across his thigh. The Work for an instant shines
For bright miles down the animal,
Fibrous moonlight of his nerves
As the leg begins its life.
His two hands cramping his thigh
Close from the rushing of the world,
He sees a Unicorn, a Serpent, and a Poison Tree
Flicker stilly from the void into the place
Which has been, until now,
Their absence by miracle. Before him,
The young hunter dies
Forever, asway in his silken cage.
The eye of Heaven grows,
Embroidered unsparingly, into the years of weaving,
Focussed where the sword fell
Historyless as cloud.
Not yet thought by the craftsmen, an angel's form
Is drugged by the green string of the hill.
It wavers on the tent-wall,
Seen gold through the bone of his brow.
He fades it helplessly back,
Increased, into the dance.
The tent feels his dampened flesh fall on
As the sun feels the backs of a herd through mist.
He smiles and licks his skull.
Memory and the Secret come apart
Upon the hovering fly.

MARIUS BEWLEY

The Cage and the Prairie: Two Notes on Symbolism

THERE IS A well-known and ominous passage in Melville's *Pierre* that might be used as an epigraph for some more or less recent books on symbolist theory: ". . . Nature is not so much her own sweet interpreter, as the mere supplier of that cunning alphabet, whereby selecting and combining as he pleases, each man reads his own peculiar lesson according to his own peculiar mind and mood." Although this attitude led Melville in *Pierre* and *The Confidence Man* into moral nihilism, in the objective existence of nature which the passage implies he yet had a straw to cling to—an argument, however slight, against that final dissolution into nothingness which Poe welcomes at the end of *Eureka*, and which Twain celebrates at the end of *The Mysterious Stranger*. Even though *Pierre* in his desperation might say, ". . . a nothing is the substance, it casts one shadow one way, and another the other way; and these . . . are Virtue and Vice," there was still a sufficiently reciprocal relation between him and the extramental world to permit a significant symbolic relation between nature and the moods of his mind. But symbolist theory has made great strides towards abolishing the possibility of such reciprocity since the days of *Pierre*. It is able to show us, as the ultimate vision, the self-subsistent, self-sufficient Symbol, out of relation with anything but its own eternally evolving being. This naturally has some important repercussions on art.

Some years ago Mr. Edmund Wilson wrote in *Axel's Castle* that by the middle of the nineteenth century the American romantic writers, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, and Emerson, were developing in the direction of symbolism. Since that relatively innocent day the application of symbolist theory to American literature has threatened to Cassirerize several major American masterpieces out of existence as significant works of art. (I had better add that I am thinking of *Moby Dick* and *The Scarlet Letter*, not of *Mardi*, *Pierre*, or *The Confidence Man*, which possibly deserve that fate.) A recent book, taking up the same authors mentioned by Mr. Wilson,

treats them under this rubric: "To consider the literary work as a piece of language is to regard it as a symbol, autonomous in the sense that it is quite distinct both from the personality of its author and from any world of pure objects, and creative in the sense that it brings into existence its own meaning." And Mr. Charles Feidelson, from whose *Symbolism and American Literature* this passage is taken, begins his book by saying: "The unified phase of American literature which began with the tales of Hawthorne and Poe and ended with Melville and Whitman was not recognized as such by the men who made it."

My purpose in quoting Mr. Feidelson here is to suggest that the current emphasis on symbolism of a particular kind is unfortunate in two respects. It tends to draw an unnatural division in the American literary tradition, to place some important writers on the wrong side of badly misplaced tracks; and it minimizes or even denies the importance of subject matter to the symbolist writer. He is left with only the symbolizing process of his own mind to talk about. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that meaning, simply by threatening to abdicate, can become an obsession with the symbolist theorist. Mr. Feidelson is aware of the danger:

The great danger of such an approach is not preciosity, as might be supposed, but intellectual suicide. . . . The nemesis that hangs over [the symbolist writer] is. . . the possibility of the meaninglessness of meaning. . . . His heaven is the meaningfulness of meaning; the tragic theme of his work is the imminent loss of meaning which is the modern version of hell.

Where recognition of the danger is so clearly made, it is surprising that Mr. Feidelson's invitation is nevertheless to the modern version of hell rather than heaven. It is plain that this is not the symbolism of Whitehead, who could write: "The symbols do not create their meaning; the meaning, in the form of actual effective beings acting upon us, exists for us in its own right." And although Mr. Feidelson groups Henry James among those American writers whose work "lay in a realm of meaning equally distinct from [their] own ego and from the world of objective experience," neither does it seem to be the symbolism of James. "I . . . guard myself against the accusation of intimating that the idea, the subject of a novel or a picture, does not matter. It matters, to my sense, in the highest degree." And we recall James's mature

dissatisfaction with *The American* precisely because he believed it to be deficient in that quality of relatedness to objective experience. "The balloon of experience," he wrote in the Preface, "is in fact of course tied to the earth, and under that necessity we swing, thanks to a rope of remarkable length, in a more or less commodious car of the imagination; but it is by the rope we know where we are, and from the moment that cable is cut we are at large and unrelated."

The extreme theory of symbolism I have been discussing denies to the artist the role of interpreting in his art the world in which he lives: or, at any rate, the world of his religious, political, and social experience and belief. It is pointless to argue with such a theory, for in a world where the ground of the symbol is only itself and language is autonomous the credentials of any opposing argument are automatically open to question. In the following pages I have no intention of discussing symbolist theory at all. But I wish to examine passages from the works of two writers who are excluded from Mr. Feidelson's "unified phase of American literature" for the purpose of showing that, although they have never been called symbolists, the vitality of these passages arises from the elements of symbolism they contain. The symbolism we shall find in them is related to the objective world in which the authors lived, and its final effect is one of moral judgment on that world. It is the symbolism of Whitehead, of *The Scarlet Letter*, and of *Moby Dick*, if not of such Melvillian heroes as Taji, Pierre, and the Confidence Man.

II

Hector St. John Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* was first published in London in 1782. I should like to take a passage from his expository prose, having no symbolic ambitions, and coming from a period to which symbolism in our sense meant little or nothing, and show how a recorded factual situation can slip the leash of the external limitations imposed by the objective data it describes, and, rising to a high imaginative level, live in the mind with essentially symbolic life while still remaining essentially related to the world of human experience and of moral values.

I was not long since invited to dine with a planter who lived three miles from——, where he then resided. In order to avoid the heat of the

sun, I resolved to go on foot, sheltered in a small path, leading through a pleasant wood. I was leisurely travelling along, attentively examining some peculiar plants which I had collected, when all at once I felt the air strongly agitated, though the day was perfectly calm and sultry. I immediately cast my eyes toward the cleared ground, from which I was but a small distance, in order to see whether it was not occasioned by a sudden shower; when at that instant a sound resembling a deep rough voice, uttered, as I thought, a few inarticulate monosyllables. Alarmed and surprised, I precipitately looked all round, when I perceived at some six rods distance something resembling a cage, suspended to the limbs of a tree; all the branches of which appeared covered with large birds of prey, fluttering about, and anxiously endeavouring to perch on the cage. Actuated by an involuntary motion of my hands, more than by any design of my mind, I fired at them; they all flew to a short distance, with a most hideous noise: when, horrid to think and painful to repeat, I perceived a negro, suspended in the cage, and left there to expire! I shudder when I recollect that the birds had already picked out his eyes, his cheek bones were bare; his arms had been attacked in several places, and his body seemed covered with a multitude of wounds. From the edges of the hollow sockets and from the lacerations with which he was disfigured, the blood slowly dropped, and tinged the ground beneath. No sooner were the birds flown, than swarms of insects covered the whole body of this unfortunate wretch, eager to feed on his mangled flesh and to drink his blood. I found myself suddenly arrested by the power of affright and terror; my nerves were convulsed; I trembled, I stood motionless, involuntarily contemplating the fate of this negro, in all its dismal latitude. The living spectre, though deprived of his eyes, could still distinctly hear, and in his uncouth dialect begged me to give him some water to allay his thirst. Humanity herself would have recoiled back with horror; she would have balanced whether to lessen such reliefless distress, or mercifully with one blow to end this dreadful scene of agonising torture! Had I had a ball in my gun, I certainly should have despatched him, but finding myself unable to perform so kind an office, I sought, though trembling, to relieve him as well as I could. A shell ready fixed to a pole, which had been used by some negroes, presented itself to me; I filled it with water, and with trembling hands I guided it to the quivering lips of the wretched sufferer. Urged by the irresistible power of thirst he endeavoured to meet it, as he instinctively guessed its approach by the noise it made in passing through the bars of the cage. 'Tankè, you whitè man, tankè you, putè somè poison and givè me.' 'How long have you been hanging there?' I asked him. 'Two days, and me no die; the birds, the birds; aaah me!' Oppressed with the reflections which this shocking spectacle afforded me, I mustered strength enough to walk away, and soon reached the house at which I intended to dine. There I heard that the reason for this slave being thus punished, was on account of his having killed the overseer of the plantation. They told

me that the laws of self-preservation rendered such executions necessary; and supported the doctrine of slavery with the arguments generally made use of to justify the practice; with the repetition of which I shall not trouble you at present.—Adieu.

It is not the shock value of this passage that makes it so intensely real for the imagination of the reader. Horrible facts are self-purging. The mind casts them out for its better health. But here the caged negro acquires a symbolic status and will not be exorcized. The image of a caged man is not in itself capable of assaulting the imagination in this way, as Marlowe's *Bajazet* can prove. Certain basic elements combine in Crèvecoeur's passage—quite apart from his explicit intention—to form the dominant symbol, and if any of these were absent the passage would lose its mysterious power.

To begin with, the vision bursts on one in the midst of the so-called best possible of worlds—a world adequately held before the mind, not only in the full context of Crèvecoeur's book, but by the measured periods and the decorous eighteenth century vocabulary in which he writes. Transfer this episode to any other century—it will have its own quality of nightmare perhaps, but it will be very different from what we have here. Profound as his shock is, Crèvecoeur measures it by the restrained code of an eighteenth century gentleman; but still his sickening sense of horror comes through like a hideous dye, obscuring the pastoral brightness of the rural scene. This contrast between his true feelings and the restrained, almost artificial expression of them illuminates the picture more vividly than anything else could; and it underscores the distorted reality of the world he lives in that he encounters the ghastly sight while walking through a pleasant wood to fulfill a genial social obligation.

In the sense the passage gives of an eighteenth century filled with neatly plotted categories, and socially with conceptions of regulation and caste, the cage suddenly becomes a symbol of metaphysical nightmare, and the negro himself a symbol of the terrible cost of merely man-made order. The whole passage is filled with effective touches that contribute to the life of the symbol. The agitation of the air, for example, which Crèvecoeur says was caused by the moving wings of the birds of prey, he mistakes at first for the sound of a sudden shower of rain. As so often in art, rain is like the promise of mercy or gentleness. But here the promise ends in a mockery by nature herself. It signifies the return of the tormentors. And there is the figure of the negro: we see him—all

that is left of his human personality—concentrated in a supplication for death. There is the faint but terrible Sacramental echo (Crèvecoeur had been a student of the Jesuits in France) of the insects, “eager to feed on his mangled flesh, and to drink his blood.” Then, after the shocking irony of, “with the repetition of which I shall not trouble you at present,” the passage in the letter ends, as Crèvecoeur takes leave of his correspondent, with the gentlest, the softest of all farewells—Adieu.

The tragedy that Crèvecoeur encountered in the Carolina woods one afternoon nearly two centuries ago cannot matter very much now merely as historical fact. But Crèvecoeur was creating a symbol without knowing it. It is not the fact that arrests us, but the way he recreated it in language. The language is not merely in touch with the immediate tragedy; it has its roots in a reality that was vaster than Crèvecoeur was consciously aware of as he wrote. From the implicitly ironic interplay between his polite and measured prose reflecting the illusion of external order in the universe, and the hideous, torturing fact of the caged negro, there open the richest symbolic perspectives. This kind of symbolism, so deeply immersed in human reality, is worth more, it seems to me, than a symbolism which is only interested in intellectual method, and whose roots are cut off from life.

III

The second passage I wish to consider here is more complex. It is by James Fenimore Cooper, who is also excluded from that “unified phase of American literature” in which the American symbolist writers so readily find their places. This is partly because the excessive claims made for symbolism today have a tendency to blind us to those subtle but more modest achievements of symbolism where the method itself is working quietly hand in hand with the materials and pressures of external reality, and where the symbolic process is not defined by the operation of some one overwhelming symbol such as *Moby Dick*, but is a quality of imagery and organization in the texture of the prose, gradually gathering towards a concentration of effect that is, in fact, a symbol although it may not overtly present itself as one. No one would call Cooper primarily a symbolist writer, and yet because all successful art contains a strong symbolic element, the best parts of Cooper are often open to symbolist interpretation. The general assumption

is that Cooper was not interested in symbols and that the writers who came later were not interested in anything else. Perhaps no American writer was less curious about form or method than Cooper was, but his work is evidence that he was passionately concerned with American experience. Cooper's complex reaction to this experience demanded a symbol, and he discovered it almost spontaneously, even without knowing it.

Natty Bumppo has often been called the greatest figure in American fiction, but his final reality for our imagination is not, I think, the reality of a fictional character with a certain history and with a set of human relationships. Rather, he embodies a meaning for us that his recorded acts do not adequately explain. This is not to say that he claims an autonomous existence out of relation to everything but himself. The idea of Natty grows out of the complicated tensions of the American experience, and as he progressively takes form in the Leatherstocking tales as a symbol he reveals unexpected levels of significance in that experience he embodies.

Natty Bumppo's role has been consistently misunderstood. Mr. James Grossman writes of him:

Natty in keeping clear of civilization's responsibilities has held on to its higher and also to its pleasanter values. The primitive forest in which he lives his youth and the naked plains on which he dies are scenes of horror and violence because of the deeds of the other white characters in the story, but for Natty they are always the great good place, an inviolable retreat from the pressure of reality. His life there is a kind of ideal bachelor existence, fastidious and untouched by the lives of others. He can afford to be helpful to every stranger, loyal for the duration of the adventure but without risk of committing himself too far.

This passage proceeds on the assumption that Natty is an ordinary fictional character who can be judged, in some degree, by criteria of social reality. But to accuse Natty Bumppo of shirking his social obligations is as far-fetched as to accuse Huckleberry Finn of juvenile delinquency. By the time Natty dies as a very old man in *The Prairie* we are not at the death scene of a man as much as we are at the apotheosis of an intellectual and spiritual attitude—an attitude that cannot be abstracted or paraphrased successfully because it has been developed with the concrete particularity of realized art. Just as Yeats' complex symbol of Byzantium is the heaven of the creative imagination, so Natty Bumppo remains a

perpetual possibility of perfection to the American imagination—and a perpetual reproach.

The final sentence of the Leatherstocking series sums up the meaning of Natty: "We live in a world of transgressions and selfishness, and no pictures that present us otherwise can be true; though happily for human nature, gleamings of that pure Spirit in whose likeness man has been fashioned are to be seen relieving and mitigating, if not excusing, its crimes." It is not a distinguished sentence, but it suggests the role that he plays. It is a ritual role in that he enacts the conscience of America in so far as it has a traditional continuity. He does not flee from the responsibilities of civilization as much as he is driven from the settlements by his refusal to compromise with what appears a failure of integrity in his eyes. The success of Cooper's treatment comes from the way he was able to endow the figure symbolizing such a meaning with the ability to live and grow in the imagination. *The Prairie*, it may be agreed, is the second best of the Leatherstocking tales, and I should like to consider a passage from it here as an illustration of that symbolic element which I have said is sometimes present in Cooper.

In the opening chapter, our first encounter with Natty Bumppo elevates him to a giant dimension in the imagination—and this first glimpse we have of him, like the last, is a measure of the symbolic content he claims. It is possibly the finest example of American baroque art that we have. There is a super-human and flame-like quality about it, an arrested violence. It begins with a description of Ishmael Bush and his family as, toward nightfall, their small wagon train makes its way across the prairie:

Still, the leader of the emigrants steadily pursued his way with no other guide than the sun, turning his back resolutely on the abodes of civilization, and plunging, at each step, more deeply if not irretrievably, into the haunts of the barbarous and savage occupants of the country. As the day drew nigher to a close, however, his mind, which was, perhaps, incapable of maturing any connected system of forethought, beyond that which related to the interests of the present moment, became, in some slight degree, troubled with the care of providing for the wants of the hours of darkness.

On reaching the crest of a swell that was a little higher than the usual elevations, he lingered a minute, and cast a half-curious eye, on either hand, in quest of those well-known signs, which might indicate a place

where the three grand requisites of water, fuel, and fodder were to be obtained in conjunction.

It would seem that his search was fruitless; for after a few moments of indolent and listless examination, he suffered his huge frame to descend the gentle declivity, in the same sluggish manner that an over-fatted beast would have yielded to the downward pressure.

His example was silently followed by those who succeeded him, though not until the young man had manifested much more of interest, if not of concern, in the brief inquiry, which each, in his turn, made on gaining the same lookout. It was now evident, by the tardy movements both of beasts and men, that the time of necessary rest was not far distant. The matted grass of the lower land presented obstacles which fatigue began to render formidable, and the whip was becoming necessary to urge the lingering teams to their labor. At this moment, when, with the exception of the principal individual, a general lassitude was getting the mastery of the travellers, and every eye was cast, by a sort of common impulse, wistfully forward, the whole party was brought to a halt, by a spectacle, as sudden as it was unexpected.

The sun had fallen below the crest of the nearest wave of the prairie, leaving the usual rich and glowing train on its track. In the center of this flood of fiery light, a human form appeared, drawn against the gilded background, as distinctly, and, seemingly as palpable, as though it would come within the grasp of any extended hand. The figure was colossal; the attitude musing and melancholy, and the situation directly in the route of the travellers. But embedded, as it was, in its setting of garish light, it was impossible to distinguish its just proportions or true character.

The effect of such a spectacle was instantaneous and powerful. The man in front of the emigrants came to a stand, and remained gazing at the mysterious object, with a dull interest, that quickened into superstitious awe. His sons, so soon as the first emotion of surprise had a little abated, drew slowly around him, and, as they who governed the teams gradually followed their example, the whole party was soon condensed in one, silent, wondering group. Notwithstanding, the impression of a supernatural agency was very general among the travellers, the ticking of gunlocks was heard, and one or two of the bolder youths cast their rifles forward, in readiness for service.

Probably no other novel in the language has first presented its principal character to us in a more heroic way. It is remarkable that Leatherstocking manages to sustain the implications of this introduction, which would be impossible were he to be considered a naturalistic character in Mr. Grossman's sense. In this scene Cooper gives him to us almost as a natural evocation of the land itself—a kind of guardian spirit of the wilderness and the prairies who stands directly across the path of the spoilers. The Bush

family regards the figure with supernatural awe, and to the reader, for whom the figure as it stands magnified in fiery light remains unidentified until the end of the chapter—to the reader also it is not a human form. The unusual power of the passage flows, as as nearly always with Cooper, from a perfect sense of timing, and from a remarkable plastic vision that enables him to group details into contrasting and palpable masses. The Bush family, themselves a remarkable achievement in the creation of character, are perfect spectators for this vision of Natty Bumppo. Their brooding heaviness, their sinister quality, the torpid but sure movement of their imaginations under powerful stimulus, provide exactly the right background figures for Cooper's baroque description of the colossal figure in the sky. For several pages Cooper leads us toward the vision with the slow-moving wagon train, the teams growing tired as daylight fades, the prairie grass longer and more matted. The reader himself begins to participate in that general fatigue which will permit the vision to react on him with maximum effect. This is not merely a dramatic entrance made by the chief character. Cooper never allows Natty to lose entirely that aura of almost supernatural power that he acquires here.

With the exception of *The Pioneers* all the Leatherstocking tales are stories of flight and pursuit, yet the chase, as it occurs in the individual novels, is merely a matter of plot mechanics. But on the other hand, the flight of Natty Bumppo before the woodchoppers as they move steadily into the West, clearing the forest as they go, is a flight charged with the deepest significance, and despite the futility of paraphrase here I wish to consider a little more fully what this flight means when we consider it as symbol. Perhaps one of the characters in *The Prairie* gives as adequate a description of Natty's meaning as anyone is ever likely to:

"The man I speak of was of great simplicity of mind, but of sterling worth. Unlike most of those who live a border life, he united the better instead of the worse qualities of the two people. He was a man endowed with the choicest—and perhaps the rarest—gift of nature—that of distinguishing good from evil."

This ability to distinguish good from evil is the ultimate note of Natty Bumppo's character, and it provides the moral passion of his flight. This flight before the advance of American civilization is virtually a moral judgement on it. Cooper presents it most often in terms of Natty's hatred of the destructive waste and sel-

fishness of the settlements, and yet it is much more complex than that. We know from Cooper's other novels that his critical knowledge of America was profound. The social criticism of America that Cooper wrote in the Effingham novels, if sometimes unfair, is frequently as pointed as James's in *The American Scene*. We have his astute political criticisms, not only in the political novels but in *The American Democrat*; and in the Littlepage trilogy we are able to read the aristocratic temper of his thought, which could be at ease with his democratic principles. Certainly the medium of Cooper's mind was subtle enough to permit an attitude of great complexity to take shape. In his political and agrarian novels he enlarged the scope of the novel itself by introducing ideas in a functional and structural way. These ideas became the *raison d'être*, the very substance of the novels, and yet they seem incomplete successes, or worse, because Cooper's personal feelings and imagination never seem deeply involved. In the Leatherstocking tales the reverse is true. The ideas are not present as such, although they may make their presence felt indirectly. Instead, the imagination takes over. Natty is not a character in the sense that Mr. Grossman implies, but a symbol thrown up from the depth of Cooper's own response to America, a response which involved both love and revulsion. Natty's love for the land of America is mystical in its proportions, and yet the civilization she was producing seemed a violation of that land itself. His flight across the continent is an unconscious but deeply realized symbol of Cooper's own recoil.

In *The Prairie*, then, Cooper endows Natty Bumppo in his symbolic role with heroic grandeur. In the opening chapter he steps from a heaven on fire, and in his magnificent death scene, which is the finest thing in the book, the old man sits facing the setting sun with his old hunting dog dead at his feet. It is not accidental that Cooper has managed to suggest that Natty Bumppo steps back into the flaming heavens from which he seemed to come. The scene has a largeness and simplicity that carries the mind back to some remote heroic age, and it places a seal of consecration on Cooper's complex response to American society and reality. Above all, it presents us with a symbol evoked from Cooper's deepest experience of America.

IV

It is obvious that in a successfully realized work of art a symbol

may discover and explore meanings beyond the artist's conscious control. That is exactly what has happened in the Crèvecoeur passage I analyzed above. And if we allow words a certain latitude and play, as we always must, we shall no doubt go ahead and say that such passages exhibit a life of their own. We may even go so far as to say that they are "autonomous." But we shall know what we mean: that from the union of the creative sensibility with the created world, the new forms, images, symbols, and meanings that may arise are innumerable and unpredictable, and are not obedient to the artist's conscious willing. And yet they will come to no call but his own. They are no more autonomous than Ariel before Prospero broke his wand, and their function is to reveal the meaning of the world. But it is meaning in this sense of which the theorist would deprive the symbolist writer: "The nemesis that hangs over him is also the final paradox which we must admit and turn to account—the possibility of the meaninglessness of meaning." And we stand mournfully aside while the greatest masterpieces of American literature, with vacancy in their eyes, hurtle down the chute to nihilism. Hawthorne is castigated because he is reluctant to join in, and any writer who proves intractable to the treatment is outside "the unified phase of American literature." But I do not wish to discuss symbolist theory. Whatever it may be to the aesthetician and the philosopher, I am sure it is profitless to the literary critic and fatal to the artist. In the passages I have analysed above I have only wished to suggest that symbolism does not necessarily exclude meaning, and is perhaps of more general occurrence in literature than the favoured list of American authors would imply. Of the terminology and approach employed by contemporary symbolist critics in treating the work of classical American authors, it seems to me that Santayana wrote the best description in *Reason in Common Sense*:

An earnestness which is out of proportion to any knowledge or love of real things, which is therefore dark and inward, and thinks itself deeper than the earth's foundations—such an earnestness, until culture turns it into intelligent interests, will naturally breed a new mythology. It will try to place some world of Afrites and shadowy giants behind the constellations, which it finds too distinct or constant to be its companions or supporters; and it will assign vague or infinite tasks, for which it is doubtless better equipped than for those the earth now sets before it. . . . All will be a tossing servitude and illiberal mist, where the parts will have no final values and the whole no pertinent direction.

ROBERT MARTIN ADAMS

Henrik Ibsen: The Fifty-First Anniversary

“*Tvert-imot!*” —Ibsen’s last words.

NINETEEN-SIX was the year Ibsen died and disappeared in a vast state-funeral at Oslo. But his plays and his restless, rage-ridden spirit have continued to walk the earth. Not everywhere; nor with a constant welcome anywhere. Americans, for example, occupied otherwise with their surprising flair for exclusive, intensive fads, have dismissed Ibsen for years with perfunctory respect and complete incomprehension. And even in England, the cults having died down or been outgrown, Ibsen has become stranger as his figure has loomed larger; till he now stands on the rim of our little Anglerican 20th century like one of Dante’s giants—dim, muffled, inarticulate, and angry, a colossus caught in the tower of his own personality.

Inescapably but embarrassingly nonetheless, the fiftieth anniversary of his death came around last year; and was observed, throughout Anglo-saxondom, with shuffling of feet, a few nervous coughs, and that genteel, self-conscious, awkward silence which is so endearing an aspect of our Puritan heritage. *Theatre Arts*, *Commonweal*, and the never-failing *TLS* ran mortuary tributes. *Partisan Review* in the person of Mary McCarthy took occasion to beat Ibsen as an unhealthy confessionalist and a shabby allegorist, using the handy sticks of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller for this respectable purpose (Winter, 1956). The *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* ran an article on sight-imagery in *The Wild Duck*. On Broadway, as in the major magazines, there was nothing. Off-Broadway there was a brief production of *The Master Builder* and an even briefer one of *A Doll’s House*. A sprinkling of academic revivals was reported from Pratt Institute westward.

But they manage these things better in France. The big Ibsen-festival which one might have anticipated in Oslo spilled over into Paris, where the Norwegian National Theater group was seen in performances of *The Wild Duck* and *Ghosts*. The Bibliothèque Nationale organized a special exhibit for the occasion; Mme. Edwige Feuillère was heard at the Sorbonne; there were articles, reconsiderations, reassessments. In Germany the flow of Ibsen-interest has never really ceased; and here too the fiftieth anniversary provoked a respectable cluster of tributes and estimates, revivals and revaluations.

Yet the melancholy fact remains that Ibsen these days is in worldwide eclipse. The storm of explanatory writing which, in the last decade of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th, set out to minimize

his strangeness and domesticate his art under the rubric of simple, naturalistic honesty, has done its work all too effectively. The modern reader knows Ibsen, or thinks he knows him, too well by half. He is established in the public mind as an author of middle-class tragedies, a man who tried to translate the art of Sophocles into the social milieu of George Gissing. It is hard to see why a first-class dramatic artist should want to undertake any such enterprise; *ergo*, Ibsen was not a first-class dramatic artist. The only flaw in this syllogism is its major premise. Ibsen in the great plays was not in any major or functional way a bourgeois realist; the effect at which he was aiming was not Sophoclean, Euripidean, or in fact tragic, except in the most attenuated sense, a sense where it does not differ much from the word "gloomy". Judged in its own terms, the effect at which he did aim is fiercely concentrated, rigorously defined, and achieved with strict economy of means. Above all, it is nothing as formal as trying to do in one social milieu what had already been perfectly well done in another.

If this argument is to be made within the scope of an article, we must not waste more than a paragraph on such fiddle-faddle as the notion that *Ghosts* is a play about venereal disease or that *A Doll's House* is a play about women's rights. On these terms, *King Lear* is a play about housing for the elderly, and *Hamlet* a discussion of the reality of apparitions. Venereal disease is represented onstage in *Ghosts*; so, to all intents and purposes, is incest; but the theme of the play is inherited guilt, and the sexual pathology of the Alving family is an engine in the hands of that theme. *A Doll's House* represents a woman imbued with the idea of becoming a person, but it proposes nothing categorical about women becoming people; in fact, its real theme has nothing to do with the sexes. It is the irrepressible conflict of two different personalities which have founded themselves on two radically different estimates of reality.

What, then, is the purpose of that bourgeois décor, lovingly detailed and meticulously accurate, which marks unfailingly the plays of Ibsen's middle period? Miss Mary McCarthy touches on one aspect when she says, approximately, that Ibsen's characters do little revealing things well and big dramatic ones badly. Perfectly so. The bourgeois décor is a combination mirror and magnifying glass through which one sees, but as through bifocal lenses, the immense moral differences that divide the saint and the satyr. In our nineteenth-century world they occur as the bank-clerk's wife and the bank-clerk; or perhaps as the country doctor and the small-town official. They are not, or do not at first seem, very far apart—husband and wife, brother and brother. But if you look at them under the cold blue light of Ibsen's satiric glance, you see exactly who they are—Apollo in a frock coat, Hecate in a bustle, dog, swine, bull, crow, and boar behind the respectable features. Steady and impervious as they seem in their own eyes, the characters of Ibsen are in the eyes of the playwright and his chosen audience deliriously transparent; and the high comedy which attaches to Torvald Helmer or Hialmar Ekdal

comes precisely from this combination (of which only the inspiredly stupid are really capable)—perfect bland solidity in themselves, and absolute transparency in the eyes of others. Miss McCarthy talks of a shocking moment when Hialmar eats bread and butter in front of his hungry daughter; but that, though it might be someone else's shock, is not Ibsen's. Hedvig is not hungry; if she wanted to eat, there is not only bread and butter but herring-salad for her. Actually, she is not present at the famous breakfast. But the point is elsewhere. Hialmar has a mighty mission to perform, and is on his way to perform it when he encounters that fatal bread and butter; and the joke is the person he reveals himself to be even as he tries to talk himself into another identity. He is one of nature's *noshers*, not her noblemen.

Like some other great writers who come to mind, Ibsen was not a man of many ideas or for that matter of wide technical virtuosity. Skeletally viewed, the plays from *Catiline* to *When We Dead Awaken* (and that covers half a century) all have a single underlying tension, are all efforts to work out the terms of a single dichotomy. Ibsen was trying all his life to find a stage-language for the sort of moral insights which appear at their clearest in the capering tetrameters and fantastic episodes of *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*. The saint and the satyr are clear to see in this diptych; and it is a commonplace that Ibsen repeated the characterizations many times. With varying accents and under differing circumstances, Parson Manders, Peter Stockmann, Hialmar Ekdal, Torvald Helmer, Parson Strawman, Stensgård, and Rebecca West represent the spirit of *Peer Gynt*; with the same qualifications, Mrs. Alving, Thomas Stockmann, Gregers Werle, Nora Helmer, Falk, Rosmer, and Lona Hessel represent the spirit of *Brand*. Bourgeois realism is simply one, perhaps the most successful, of half a dozen different vehicles through which Ibsen tried to adjust his moral insights to the requirements of dramatic presentation. The so-called "middle-class dramas" all reverberate to the urgent note of a single conflict. The tension which explodes in the last act of *A Doll's House* is heard as a high, thin scream of agony throughout *Ghosts*. Shouted boisterously from the housetops in *An Enemy of the People*, it is magnificently inverted and buried in *The Wild Duck*, and raised to the cold, silver-gray tonality of tragic resignation and acceptance in *Rosmersholm*. In a familiar but handy jargon, it is the conflict between the ethical and the acquisitive personalities.

Ibsen's attitude toward this glacial schism in human nature, for which he found a terminology in Kierkegaard and an evidence in the slightest acts of everyday life, was ambiguous enough to satisfy the most passionate present-day pursuer of literary ambiguities. *Brand* is clearly a celebration of the heroic ethical personality as contrasted with the meeching conformity of the acquisitive, self-centered easygoers who find it easy to adjust all mottoes to the middle of the road. The respectable official and the bohemian artist are at one in repudiating the claim of the moral absolute; from this perspective one can glance forward to observe the

artistic element which lies latent even in a clod like Torvald Helmer, a retoucher of life *par excellence*, a notary built precisely out of the debris of a poet. Against all this formless mish-mosh of the esthetic and acquisitive Brand sets himself heart and soul; but in the crashing chord of the last macaronic verse,

Han er *Deus Caritatis!*

Brand is repudiated. Peer Gynt is clearly exposed, throughout the rollicking fantasy which bears his name, as an unscrupulous, acquisitive, esthetic rascal who in the pursuit of lies and acquisitions loses his own self; unpeeled, like an onion, he turns out to consist of wrappings without a center. Yet at the last moment, when he is completely lost, he is found, in the love of Solveig. *The Wild Duck* caricatures the peddler of ethical truth whom *An Enemy of the People* glorifies. A child could choose with more precision and decision than Ibsen ever displayed between the alternatives which he proposed to himself. A shopgirl could find more attractive alternatives to choose between. Any mealy-mouthed purveyor of platitudes could combine Ibsen's attitudes by watering them down to bring him safely within the confines of the great commonplace—"Truth without love is vain," or some such shuffling together of high-sounding incompatibles. But the man himself defies these comfortable formulations; he was one of the great disquieters, and if he could not bring himself to a snug reconciliation of "love" and "truth", for example, it was because he knew better than the snug what these commitments imply. It was the sense that Ibsen was somehow in touch with moral categories larger and deeper than those commonly available to men that made him an international culture-hero to the late nineteenth century. He provided no answers, though his tone was always dogmatic; he asked, instead, terrible searching questions, at the top of his voice, with perfect scorn for anyone who did not know the answers, and only a little hesitation at his own ability to find them. As with Goethe, whom he resembles in so many ways, there is always an uneasy possibility that the inclusive-inconclusive Ibsen is a vast, vague Germanic fraud. The possibility cannot be talked out of existence, or exorcised with big names; yet if Ibsen was a mere windy trickster, it is odd that contemporaries as acute and diverse as James, Joyce, and Shaw should have been taken in by him.

But the inconclusive quality of Ibsen's philosophy, which is not in itself particularly novel or individual, has a special effect on the patterning of his dramas. At least until we come to those of the last period, starting with *Rosmersholm*, they are not arranged to provide an acting-out of guilt, a release, a lustration; they end with an assumption of new guilt, a full appreciation of one's total responsibility—and sometimes with a sharp repudiation of the audience itself for having been an audience assisting at an esthetic performance when it should have been acting and judging in an ethical one. After twenty years of struggle and failure, Ibsen's first international success was *Brand*; but he spoke of the play

with disgust and disappointment (which it is hard not to think somewhat unreasonable), saying that he had written merely a play when he wanted to produce an action, a moral deed (Koht, *Life of Ibsen*, II, 27). The stage is not, perhaps, an inevitable place to express distaste for pretending; or is it? Where and how else could a determined disquieter produce more disquiet?

The sardonic view which Ibsen takes of all his characters—of Nora as well as Torvald Helmer, of Oswald as well as Helen Alving, of Thomas as well as Peter Stockmann, of Dr. Relling and little Hedvig Ekdal as well as of Gregers Werle and Hialmar—is one major reason why the effect of his plays is not pronouncedly tragic. Mockery alienates; and none of Ibsen's characters is quite exempt from the corrosive effect of his mockery. There is, then, relatively little identification; the audience does not transfer its feelings into the protagonist; and hence, when the protagonist "falls", there is almost no tragic release in the patterning of the plays. *A Doll's House* ends by deliberately outraging the audience's dumb, hopeful, and generous character; the slamming of that door is as deliberate as the last, sneering chorus of *The Threepenny Opera*. *The Wild Duck* ends, in total impasse, on an unresolved and ironic discord. Even *Ghosts* (which provides a less obvious example) does not leave the viewer "with calm of mind, all passion spent"; quite the contrary. It winds him up to a pitch, and leaves him there. The audience has not seen the humbling of a pride which it shares with the protagonist; it has not even seen the unintended consequences of a wrong decision brought instructively home to the person who made it. Both these actions are well within the range of emotional patterning which we usually call "tragic". But the fate of Mrs. Alving, while it has certain didactic overtones connected with failure to make up one's mind, does not really purify the emotions or exemplify a general rule at all. After showing us clearly that to live in a slavish and dishonest manner is contemptible, it shows with equal clarity that to live freely and honestly is ruinous. Act II burns up the orphanage, Act III burns up Oswald. It is a fate imagined by a man who hated humanity for adopting shoddy consolations in place of the truth that kills, a man whose fundamental idea was to "torpedo the Ark." Ibsen's play strikes us with much the same sickening impact as the blow which stuns a bullock in an abattoir. Humanistically speaking, the ending of *Ghosts* is altogether unhealthy; but then its aim is not to render an image of man, no, nor of woman either, as wise, healthy, and virtuous. It aims to nose out a corpse in the cargo, it seeks to demonstrate in the entire human condition a sickness unto death and beyond it.

The personal element so deeply buried in Ibsen's plays has sometimes come in for objections—objections moral as well as artistic; but I am unable to feel their full force. Artists from time immemorial have felt free to make of themselves moral paradigms for the edification of the many; one thinks of Dante and Milton, Joyce and Rimbaud. Conceivably there are moral objections to the sort of morality Ibsen undertook to represent; a writer who takes the Fall of Man with perfectly desperate

seriousness must always seem a little *outré* to the feckless antinomian taste of today. But this is a *donnée* no odder than that of Yeats' theosophy; and certainly it is less reprehensible in practical moral terms than a number of others one can think of. Miss McCarthy thinks Ibsen was guilty of a kind of irresponsible playing with language and symbol which he seems to reprobate in *The Wild Duck* but continued to use anyhow.¹ Morals are somewhat oddly mingled with semantics in this criticism; but let it be met straightforwardly. Ibsen thought guilt a universal condition; he thought that he partook of this guilt, and could only show it properly by showing that he shared it, accepted it, reflected it. Now and then he saw that in particular circumstances his special appetite for guilt might have unfortunate practical effects, might be too much for pathetic humanity to bear; but as a rule this did not bother him much. In others words, Ibsen never really repudiated (even in *The Wild Duck*) the moral distinctions which provided the essential tensions of his creative life. If they were too much for little Hedvig Ekdal, well, that was too bad. They were too much for Rosmer and Rebecca, for Halvard Solness, John Gabriel Borkman, Professor Rubek, and a whole host of Ibsen's later heroes. They might well be, Ibsen thought, too much for the human race as a whole—still, they were inherent in the human condition as he saw and represented it. A melancholy paradox, that Ibsen had no one to communicate this dangerous truth to, except the shambling human race itself; and they naturally take a somewhat interested view of the matter. Yet perhaps it is a good thing to have at least one author who, while he knows exactly what we are in our own terms, does not take us entirely at that valuation, who can see us from a longer, colder perspective. In the theater especially, our daily fare is human, all too human.

There is of course something vulnerable about a man who preaches suicide but does not commit it, who scorns art but continues to produce it. On this score, *The Wild Duck* is quite as unsparing as Ibsen's worst enemy could have been. But this is a paradox far larger than Ibsen's individual character. What he wants to say, and says very movingly, is that the passionate pursuit of any one intellectual ideal, no matter how rigorous, no matter how admirable, is ultimately a form of self-indulgence; that life is a tension of incompatible demands. He was in real life the victim of this situation; through his art he was able to evade it; but

¹It is a curious spectacle, and one indicative of Ibsen's immense intellectual distance, that a person of Miss McCarthy's stature should be found arguing in a reputable quarterly that Gregers Werle represents Ibsen himself and not Kierkegaard. As if, forsooth, the problem presented by Gregers were not precisely the Kierkegaard spirit in Ibsen—as if “All or Nothing” were not the central problem of every drama from *Brand* through *An Enemy of the People*, and of course on the hither side of *The Wild Duck*, too. A quick run through Mr. B. W. Downs' trim volume, *Ibsen, the Intellectual Background*, would have saved Miss McCarthy a lot of painfully naive and amateur argumentation: “Kierkegaard was neat around the house and Gregers Werle was messy, therefore, etc.” See *Partisan Review*, Spring, 1956.

throughout his whole restless career, with its remarkable succession of "turning-points", he was trying to express and in some way to overcome it.

Artistically speaking, I find much more to be said against Ibsen's lurking presence in the dramas. Especially in the later, "symbolic" series, there is something stiff and stolid about Ibsen's allegory. Independent of staging, without regard for pronouncedly "symbolic" interpretations, the thought gets too heavy and turgid for the action. *The Master Builder* is an example of this allegory which lays its dead hand over the framework of the drama, and makes us feel awkward or silly in the presence of something pompous. Hilda Wangel and her dream-kingdom of Appelsinia; it is all very mock-mystifying, and the more one knows about little Fraulcin Bardach from Vienna and her frigid Berchtesgaden flirtation with Herr Doktor Ibsen, the more the whole play seems like a put-together piece of pseudo-profundity. Aside from this stiff, make-believe quality, too, confessional allegory imposes major limitations on the varieties of effect which are possible on the stage. Ibsen tended to repeat himself from drama to drama, and what he had to say got said with a rather overpowering fullness. Still, I am far from writing off all the last dramas as equally bad. *Little Eyolf* may not, perhaps, be a stage action at all, but its low, devout melancholy, its endless twistings, turnings, and variations on the themes of human guilt and human weakness, seem to me infinitely moving and perceptive.

Yet, to return to the main plays and the confessional, "symbolic" element as it undeniably occurs in these stage actions; at its best it provides a kind of indirect and satiric light which fills the simplest objects and most natural actions with luminous and perfect meaning. The Christmas tree and the letter stuck in a mailbox in *A Doll's House*; or the range and shading of sentiment about photography in *The Wild Duck*; or Engstrand's home for sailors in *Ghosts*; these things have a life of their own and then a life behind that life, a double existence that is the essence of Ibsen's art, and which they could never have if he were not writing "confessionally," on two levels. Whatever one calls the technique, "confessional," "allegorical," or "symbolist," it gives depth to a stage action, satiric indirectness to the author's point of view, and, at its best, immense vitality to the characters on the stage.

It is in terms like these that we ought to consider Ibsen, as Mr. Krutch (*Theatre Arts*, October, 1956) asks us to consider him, "a poet." The poetry is to be found, not in the flatulent and often obscure Germanic symbolism of the last plays (Miss McCarthy rightly calls it "corny"); not in fine writing, of which the best plays of the middle period are entirely and ruthlessly denuded; not in inventive frolics of wit and fancy, such as Ibsen showed himself capable of in *Peer Gynt*. It lies in an extraordinary gift of perfectly quiet, perfectly lucid double vision, hidden behind the polished façade of an amazingly supple and indirect dialogue. There is nothing more to it, really, than placing a blank short perspective next to an infinitely lengthened one, and making a counterpoint of the

two. Some subtlety went into the writing of this counterpoint; it is rich in hints, innuendos, silences, avoidances, half-admissions. There is also something perfectly impeccable and cold about Ibsen's long vision, an austerity bespeaking long and almost inhuman discipline. But the essence of the effect is simplicity, not trickery; Ibsen's is an art of seeing into something and through it, not of raising hackles on the audience by promoting an intense reaction for or against it. Only contrast the Victorian-domestic treatment of adultery in a popeyed melodrama like James's *Portrait of a Lady* with the cool, understated handling of the same theme in *Rosmersholm*; it is the moral difference between *Sandford & Merton* and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. But, cold and remote as Ibsen's best perspectives often are, I do not think he uses them, even in *Hedda Gabler* (or at least never before then), to make dramatic conflicts an occasion of histrionic display. His view of life is bifocal and perhaps a little mad; but it is hardly ever stagy. Late photographs of Ibsen show a curious quality of the man's physical features; one eye focusses on the camera, the other looks fiercely through it, through the miserable photographer and the whole miserable nineteenth century, fastened on an infinite and perhaps a purely private perspective.

He was, in fact, a perfectly destructive author; the critics have shied away from saying it, and the explanatory writers of the early century thought it an impeachment to be repelled at all costs. But the long string of suicidal endings in the last plays (from *Rosmersholm* on, with the exception of *The Lady from the Sea*) tells its own story. Ibsen's satire of human beings was based on a discontent with the human condition itself. In his mind the very act of creation was a bringing of the soul to doom-judgment, a release of poisonous hatreds, a conditioned reflex keyed to personal torture. Modern opinion tends dimly to associate Ibsen as a late-nineteenth-century post-romantic with John Stuart Mill, Emile Zola, and chromos of "The Man With the Hoe" in dark wood frames. We shall probably be a good deal closer to the truth if we try for a while putting him with Jonathan Swift, Gustave Flaubert, and Franz Kafka as one of the great negative voices in literature. "Der Jasager und der Neinsager"—it is an old dichotomy and a trite one; but I cannot see that the respectable party has yet established any inherent superiority or even temporary advantage. I hope it never will. If anything, we make too little of our sceptics; and, by trying to huddle all authors together under the same umbrella of a liberal-Christian-democratic-individualist commonplace, render them perfectly innocuous and undistinctive.

In death as in life, Ibsen resists amalgamation or even absorption. First and foremost he was a moralist, perhaps the last and surely the bitterest of the 19th-century moralists; but our age has heard enough peddling of a third-hand morals to be automatically suspicious even of first-hand ones. Ibsen was also a poet; but a poet who had to bury his poetry under the very prose of prose in order to make it live. He was a realist who thought nineteenth-century reality the most fantastic and improbable set of disguises ever devised by the mind of man. Finally,

he took toward human existence as a whole a complex and austere viewpoint which is hard to communicate, difficult to appreciate, and impossible, really, to enjoy—which lays claim, in fact, to only one merit, that of embodying some part of a bitterly uncomfortable truth. Since our age has no concern whatever with truth, but only with adjustment, integration, motivation, and acceptance, Ibsen is evidently obsolete. Indeed, given all the handicaps which he chose or was furnished, it must always be more surprising that Ibsen once attained widespread popularity than that he has presently lost it.

Of course he is not, in a textbook phrase, the Father of Modern Drama. Such wholesale paternity would disgust him. Even Peer Gynt was asked to father only one troll-brat—why must Ibsen be saddled with responsibility for Tennessee Williams? The *Streetcar*, that primordial Williams play which is every year transposed into a different key under a different title, clearly derives from *Madame Bovary*—a novel which is also said, in its way, to be confessional. Perhaps Clifford Odets has a dramatic parent; if so, who can it be but Chekhov? Eugene O'Neill was begotten by Strindberg. And so it goes. If Ibsen has present-day successors, one of them is no doubt Arthur Miller. This is no more Ibsen's fault than it is to his credit. So long as we have a middle-class, we shall probably have dramas which discuss middle-class problems in a middle-class milieu. But if Ibsen's bourgeois décor and personal allegory lead somewhere near Arthur Miller, one must also add that his satiric vision and ethical insights point toward Bert Brecht. Brecht's epic theater is something other than Ibsen's ethical theatre largely because of Brecht's rueful, comic personality. But its core is the transformation of the audience from audience to something better, to the role of participant in the action or judge of it. The drama of Brecht invites us to sit in doom-judgment on a soul, a nation, a society, a condition of life; like Ibsen's drama it refuses the happy ending, in fact, the ending of any sort. Whatever its ultimate value, the theater of Brecht is certainly the largest and most impressive structure on the contemporary theatrical horizon.

And even if we insist upon visiting the sins of the sons on the fathers—an odd undertaking at any estimate—the chances are that Ibsen will not stagger under the burden. How many playwrights whose best work was done before 1890 are the fathers of anything or anyone these days? If Miss McCarthy is found beating Ibsen in the columns of *Partisan Review*, it can only be because he stands out among the windrows of dead and stacked dramatists as a figure still instinct with life, if not with health. He has long outlived the first generation of his offspring, Pinero and Jones, as well as his contemporaries, Scribe, Sardou, *et al.*; he is remembered now, when Christopher Fry is as dusty as Elmer Rice, and I make bold to think he will still be a subject of discussion when Ionesco and Beckett have taken their places among the fashionable obscure. No one will mistake him for a dramatist of the order of Sophocles or Shakespeare; but it will take a long perspective and some little purity of motive to account for him in the end.

JOHN HOLLOWAY

Tank in the Stalls: Notes on the “School of Anger”

ANYONE IN BRITAIN who has anything to say about Angry Young Men had better say it quickly: the field is now trampled over so often, it is rapidly becoming contaminated. I must therefore snap up a passing reference in the London Letter of the current *Manchester Guardian Weekly* (July 4th), since this may be my last reputable chance. No one, by now, need be surprised to find passing references in the weeklies. The surprise would be not to. The trend seems to have begun with John Wain's *Hurry on Down* (1953); although the name is taken from an in essence quite irrelevant context, Leslie Paul's *Angry Young Man* (1951) which is about angry youth in politics, left-wingism and unemployment during the 1930's. It is just accident that this originally political label is attached to the string now so often wrapped around Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*, John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, George Scott's part-autobiography *Time and Place* and the rest. Although the chief danger may be facile generalization, it is a nominal risk to say that these take less of a political stand than a stand against having any political stand. This, indeed, is explicitly the gist of Mr. Amis's recent Fabian pamphlet. I hope in a moment to offer a hint as to why this attitude should have developed. The first thing to notice is how frequently these books and their authors are now made into a shuttlecock by the press and the weeklies and in conversation. (The latest is a strip cartoon in the *Daily Mirror*.) The second, to trace if one can the curious way in which this interest in them has been limited.

‘A new kind of “hero”’: (quotation marks multiply as mark of one's embarrassment). This is what one is now so often told has arrived. Since every event has a cause, it must be proper to ask what has brought him. K. W. Gransden (*Twentieth Century*, March 1957) hints that he is the product of a generation of writers who are having it both ways, or nearly: trying to run with the establishment and hunt with the ‘creative opposition’—enjoying both the sweets and the bitters of success. Geoffrey Gorer (*New Statesman*, May 4th) offers sociology: young men who pass through the present educational system of state school and grant-aided university (more like the sweeping steps of the British Museum than an educational ‘ladder’: and so it should be), marry into a higher class than they come from—‘male hypergamy’—and get adopted into it. The price they pay is psychological strain which they or their representatives then put into plays or novels. Hence ‘the new hero’: tough, rude, clumsy, ill-dressed, ill-washed, an enemy of phoney ‘culture’ and phoney everything—and successful with that unexplained but decisive success which usually belongs to *Zeitgeist* figures.

I have not forgotten the *Manchester Guardian Weekly*; but why it justified re-opening this question must wait for a moment. There is no 'new kind of hero' at all. No one kind. This becomes clear as soon as the investigation turns to cases. There may be a simplification or a generalization to be made: this isn't it. The hero of *Lucky Jim* may be rude and ill-dressed; but all in all he is human and considerate in a world mainly of paper cut-outs, he gets the livelier job and the superior girl, and his clumsiness is the formidable kind: it is a true driving force, it arrives. Charles Lumley (*Hurry on Down*) ends with more money, but by chance, not by drive; at the end of the book 'he valued his niche simply because it gave him the means, through his new wealth, to put himself beyond the struggle'. The social aim is 'neutrality', opting out from a social war: 'his demands on life had grown smaller and smaller'. Jimmy Porter of *Look Back in Anger* ('Lucky Jimmy Porter' I have heard him called: there are no on-the-spot fines in Britain, but we need them for such bad and misleading jokes as that) isn't successful at all, doesn't want success, and couldn't but destroy it if he got it. No one, on the other hand, could be less of a rubber-boat-always-knocked-about-but-always-comes-up figure. Joe Lampton (in John Braine's *Room at the Top*) is remarkably competent and remarkably successful: but finds (or so we are told, for the end of the story is thin) that success, wealth, marriage up the ladder, prove a sham. Thomas Hinde's *Happy as Larry* seems relevant here. Larry Vincent too is just as much a hypergamist as Jimmy Porter. He and his wife also live in an attic flat. He too is always out of a job and into a pub. But he is totally ineffective instead of successful, a feeble-minded trouble-making intolerable saint instead of an overbearing bully, and a Londoner instead of a Midlander or a Northerner. Kingsley Amis's second novel (*That Uncertain Feeling*) is perhaps a minor document in the case. Lewis, its hero, is somewhere between Jim Dixon and Joe Lampton. John Wain's *Living in the Present* seems not to be in the genre at all.

This is the merest sketch: but clearly, the differences between these characters are as clear as the similarities or clearer. Of course these books reflect contemporary social pressures and tensions. Of course one can see in them some of the social and psychological difficulties which confront successful risers in the educational system (and these were by no means many until the very recent past); or the spread of south-of-England suburban amenities or pseudo-amenities to the industrial north (this I suspect to be one of our most important recent changes); or the garish drabness, rootlessness and money-making cynicism which have been common (and their opposites have been common too) in post-war England. What does all this amount to? It amounts to a very simple fact, the simplicity of which we seem rather to have forgotten: various aspects of the total social spectrum have been turning up in novels. New ones have to turn up for the first time.

The *Manchester Guardian Weekly* was simply reporting that Siegfried Sassoon had been awarded the 1957 Queen's Medal for Poetry: 'today's

angry young man is notoriously tomorrow's recipient of honours', it said. The completely casual reference is index of how familiar the idea has grown. 'Today' and 'tomorrow' were being used somewhat freely, since the reference back was to Sassoon's savagely ironical war poems, the jolly general who fraternized with the troops and 'did for them all with his plan of campaign', or the silly audiences at shows:

I'd like to see a tank come down the stalls
 Lurching to ragtime tunes, or 'Home Sweet Home',
 And there'd be no more jokes in music-halls
 To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.

The anger of Sassoon's war poems was not, of course, the kind with which my note is concerned. Were there no earlier analogy whatever to the situations and attitudes of Amis, Wain, Osborne, etc., then the problem might be other than it is and harder than it is. By good luck, however, *that earlier analogy is ready to hand*:

Acting on Chitterlow's advice to have a bit of a fresher before returning to the Emporium, K— walked some way along the Leas and back, and then went down to a shop near the Harbour to get a cup of coffee. He found that extremely invigorating, and he went on up the High Street to face the inevitable terrors of the office After all, it was not an unmanly headache; he had been out all night, and he had been drinking, and his physical disorder was there to witness the fact . . . he pulled his spirits together, put his hat back from his pallid brow, thrust his hands into his trousers pockets, and adopted an altogether dissipated carriage . . . Just for a moment he was glad that his patch at the knee was, after all, visible, and that some, at least, of the mud on his clothes had refused to move at Chitterlow's brushing. What wouldn't they think he'd been up to? He passed them without speaking.

'K—' is not Kafka, it is *Kipps*. H. G. Wells in 1905 was already busy with such topics as rising in the world, the petty Jack-in-Office, phoney middle-class culture—Miss Walshingham and her wood-carving class. *Mr. Polly* (1910) had less education than Jimmy Porter got from his white-tile university or Joe Lampton from a correspondence course in a PW camp; but he still had some. There are other resemblances. 'At first there were attempts to bully him (Polly) on account of his refusal to consider face-washing a diurnal duty, but two fights with the apprentices next above him established a useful reputation for choler, and the presence of girl apprentices in the shop somehow raised his standard of cleanliness to a more acceptable level.' The futile, angry scene with which the book opens does not occur until Polly is thirty-seven; but it is like the opening scene of *Look Back in Anger* in that it too displays a cosmic disgust which is focussed upon the speaker's squalid home life, and which is provoked by what, in 1905, was no bad shot at a psychological malaise:

He suffered from *indigestion* now nearly every afternoon in his life, but as he lacked introspection he projected the associated discomfort upon the world.

Wells' dialogue dates, of course. 'Hole! . . . 'Ole! . . . Oh! *Beastly* silly Wheeze of a hole!' is not mid-century conversation and is not mid-century humour. What Jimmy Porter says is 'Let's pretend that we're human beings, that we're actually alive' (which is not mid-century humour either). Wells may be different (in ways not relevant at present, he is profoundly so), but Wells is what, in anger or oblivion doesn't matter, John Osborne is looking back to.

Nor Wells only. Given that we are concerned not with one unique thing, but with a related variety of things which have been getting into English novels in recent years; and given also that to trace a partial resemblance is not to claim a total identity, the parallels go further. *Jude the Obscure* is one:

'If that can be done,' said Jude, 'at college gates in the most religious and educational city in the world, what shall we say as to how far we've got?'

'Order', said one of the policemen, who had been engaged with a comrade in opening the huge doors opposite the college. 'Keep yer tongue quiet, my man, while the procession passes.'

. . . 'Well. *I'm an outsider* to the end of my days' (Jude) sighed after a while.

—or Bob Sawyer, sixty years earlier still, giving a party which included a young gentleman 'in a shirt emblazoned with pink anchors': certainly no happier than Larry about his landladies, and clearly looking in anger at them:

'That's her malevolence, that's her malevolence,' returned Mr. Bob Sawyer, vehemently. 'She says that if I can afford to give a party I ought to be able to pay her confounded "little bill" '.

Perhaps there is no need to go back along this tightrope any further. The shifts and differences are of course great. The 1950's have their distinctive features. Some of them get into these novels. Others elsewhere. The essence of the matter is that these novels merely illustrate, in varied detail, local or transient forms of permanent social stresses in English life up and down the country; and that to do so has been a recurrent feature of the English novel. If the heroes have something new in common, they have something old in common too. If the plots centre on details of jobs, money, sex and success, they centre on what the English novel centred on throughout the nineteenth century.

The surprise, in fact, is not that this should be so, but rather that readers should be surprised and intrigued when they find the details of obscure middle-class provincial life occupying the substance of what make a claim to be serious and ambitious novels (Amis and Wain have standing as

poets, critics, and commentators in general upon the current cultural scene).

Why should work of this kind be a source of surprise and intrigue? I can only venture a very long shot at this, because to give the full answer would be to write the history of literature and of thought about it in Britain this century. But several things afford clues. Among them are Virginia Woolf's essay on "Modern Fiction" (included in *The Common Reader*, 1925), with its attack on Wells and eulogy of Russian fiction. The counterpart of this is Amis's depreciation of Virginia Woolf in a recent issue of the weekly *Spectator*. The best clue to what has been going on, though, may possibly be John Wain's verse. On the surface, this is cool, self-depreciatory, ironical: it follows on from William Empson, and Wain has claimed more than once that he was the first to work the Empson line, as it were. In so far as this is so, it would have its relation to the poetic revolution of Eliot and Pound (largely, as everyone knows, on French models) and would continue their reaction against the English poetic tradition of the Romantics and the Nineteenth Century. Yet in these characteristic lines from a poem characteristically entitled *Eighth Type of Ambiguity*, is that really what one finds?—

When love as germ invades the purple stream
It splashes round the veins and multiplies
Till objects of desire are what they seem;

Then *all creation wears a chic disguise* . . .

'Chic' is an unkind and perhaps unnecessary word in my context, but the words I have italicized bear an illuminating relation to Wain's own verse. Take *Don't Let's Spoil It All*:

She had to *leave him choking in his fear* . . .
The lesson is that *dying hearts must die*.

Or take *Reasons for Not Writing Nature Poetry*. One can imagine Pound, or conceivably Eliot, endorsing that subject. But treated this way?—

Content, without embellishment, to note
How little beauty *bids the heart rejoice*,
How little beauty *catches at the throat*.
Simply, I love this mountain and this bay
With love that I can *never speak by rote* . . .

This is exactly the reason against writing nature poetry which would have least appealed to them. We know, however, where to look for poetry which sees the cosmos essentially as fringe for the ego, or which claims that there are thoughts (especially about mountains and what goes with them) that lie too deep for tears or words. It is not in the work of Eliot and Pound, it is in what they reacted from.

My last port of call would be, with Virginia Woolf's praise for the Russians and depreciation of Wells in mind, the well-known letter of D.

H. Lawrence (5 June, 1914) in which he expresses his new conception of personality as it concerns the novelist ('you musn't look in my novel for the old stable *ego* of the character'), and starts by saying that this is something he has partly learnt from Marinetti. Everyone is agreed, I suppose, that literature in England, in the two decades after 1910, received the biggest impact of avant-garde ideas, interests and techniques from the continent of Europe that it had had since the later seventeenth century. This relates not only to Pound and Eliot, but also to Joyce, to Lawrence ('I believe that, just as an audience was found in Russia for Tchekhov, so an audience might be found in England for some of my stuff': letter of 1 Feb., 1913), Yeats, and (one should have Bergson in mind besides the Russians) Virginia Woolf.

The present fact is that in Britain this great impulse has largely spent itself; just as the not altogether dissimilar impulse spent itself by the mid-eighteenth century. One could go even further, and say that rather as mid-eighteenth century writers were veering round towards Spenser's and our other early poetry, but at the same time were inclined to patronize these things, so there are writers today who disparage Romantic poets while standing far nearer to them than they think.

Here I revert to provincial young men who grow up, get grants and girls, and struggle to climb up in or out of the career stream. What John Wain's verse shows so clearly, his novels and those of the others show not much less so. The Great Continental Impact (we were in for it when two American college teachers got off their boats around 1910), is no longer the decisive force; and English writing, for good or ill, is reverting to some of its more indigenous traditions. In poetry the situation is complex by virtue partly of the fact that the continental, Symbolist influence was deeply and in large part rightly linked with a recovery of what had been forgotten in our own Elizabethan-Jacobean period. In the novel, we are reverting to our well-established nineteenth century preoccupations: the detail of our provincial and local life; our elaborate and multiple gradations of money, influence or power; and what has perhaps always been intimately linked with these, our processes of sexual selection. To be surprised or especially intrigued by the Angry Young Man school (to speak in labels for a moment) is merely to take the admirable, but special and indeed esoteric fictional preoccupations of the last thirty years as not special, but normal; and to find the familiar unfamiliar when one sees it again after, in more than one sense, a Period.

That the Continental Injection has worn off seems to me to be a plain fact. True, the work I have been discussing makes one say that this is a major loss and very little gain with it. Whether that must always be the verdict remains to be seen. What may even now be added, though, is that the fully effective recovery of some of the indigenous resources of our literature, and at the same time the enrichment of them with at least something from the last forty years, is one of the major tasks now confronting the writer in Britain.

WILLIAM S. POSTER

Dance Chronicle

WITH ALL THE VAST FLURRY of theatrical activity in New York, it is, to those interested in such matters, a cause for melancholy astonishment that so little of it seems to be in any way contemporary and vital and even less of it "advanced", in the sense of dealing with the most recent predicaments of man or projecting the more difficult, tenuous tremors of the artist's psyche as it reaches out towards the living present and the dangerous future. A truly terrible pall of the past hangs over our proseniens. The safe plays of all history are exhumed, revived, revised and musicalized, often in complete defiance of sense and propriety. Perhaps the complex financial structure of the theatre makes any effort at genuine innovation impossible—but that is the affair of bankers, not critics. Even the newer plays by the less commercial groups seem hopelessly dedicated to the past, out to combine old effects with a superficially novel manner.

For those who wish to see attempts to create aesthetic moments on stage under the same fierce pressures that assault the ordinary individual trying to create life for himself, there remains that ragged, affected, admired and shunned, self-consciously Bohemian stepchild of the theatre, "the modern dance." True, for a long period, it seemed that those theoreticians who argued that modern dance was superfluous, that its valid contributions could easily be fitted into the structure of traditional ballet while its excrescences would be pared away, were essentially correct. During the time when two and often three American companies were turning out numbers of exciting new dancers and works that not only utilized but even advanced the modern idiom, there seemed little point to the recitals of isolated choreographer-performers who had by then, moreover, been persuaded to master traditional ballet technique and incorporate it into their own styles. But during the last few years the much-bruited adaptability of ballet has worn paper-thin. None of the American dancers or choreographers have matured into dependable major artists and the companies that appear in New York, despite their great popularity, have never been so unadventurous, so conspicuously lacking in any dynamic relation to the present. Ironically, the aesthetic desuetude once steadfastly predicted for ballet by the grimmer advocates of modern dance seems to be taking place long after they, themselves, have been wooed away from their doctrines.

Not that the modern dance has offered anything like an explosion of greatness on the stage. But its very vices, its deliberate hole-in-corner quality, its cultishness, its insistence on what may seem like self-persecution, the very form of its relation to society and life have enabled a handful of its disciples to remain genuinely creative in present-day terms in a way that contrasts sharply with the deliquescence of most theatre forms. Merce Cunningham's recent recital¹ certainly places him conspicuously among

¹Brooklyn Academy of Music, January 12, 1957.

that small number. It is, however, a little difficult to evaluate his work because of the infrequency of his performances. We have just witnessed, I believe, his first New York recital in three years, and since I missed the previous one and this consisted of a single performance, the best I can offer is some sketchy impressions about it and about its relation to his past.

Ever since his early appearances in Martha Graham's group Cunningham's reputation for sheer technical ability and presence has been deservedly high. Tall and wiry in build, he is also fabulously supple, a natural, easy dancer possessed of the blind, self-absorbed charm that characterizes the gifted male lyric dancer. From the very beginning he has been troubled by a conflict of a kind that besets more than one talented New York artist (painters and dancers in particular), an instinctive tendency towards the virtues of grace, speed, virtuosity and even gaiety clashing with an aesthetic credo that demands precisely the opposite qualities. The Graham idiom, sombre, weighty and muscular, has always seemed to oppress rather than release Cunningham. Its slow contractions, contorted extensions, its heavy tread and constant use of the floor, are doubly difficult for a tall thin man. But Cunningham has remained close to its basic contours even after leaving the group.

The process of adapting his abilities to the demands of this style has not been unfruitful for him. For in his own early work, lacking the social and psychoanalytic ideologies that helped other Graham graduates to stabilize their dance, Cunningham fell prey to a skittish, thin and tasteless kind of literary preciosity. But the modernist idiom, inflexible, weighty and almost pontifically serious, has functioned to provide an ideal discord with his natural proclivities, the resulting tension and strain, the technical and expressional conflicts thus engendered, taking the place, I believe, of the emotional and intellectual conflicts the traditional artist is usually engaged in resolving.

It is the necessity for resolving this conflict that has possibly forced Cunningham into the career of choreographer-dancer in the modern vein when he might very easily have drifted into ballet or dancing for other choreographers. It is a career that in its fierce isolation and constant drain on personal resources offers an excessively arduous solution of the increasingly difficult relations between innovating artists and the public. It is also, in its escape from the rigors of regular exhibition and the eye of critics, frequently an easy way out, a way of maintaining oneself as the center of an admiring, not overly critical clique. Cunningham's dance mirrors this extreme contrast in its combination of artistic indolence and overstrain, overall stylistic eclecticism and climactic originality, its rejection of popular success and its adept handling of its own small audience. Its one single-minded, unclouded virtue is the underlying feel for physical work as a way of life, a salvation from the uncertainties and ambiguities of its situation.

Long, routine stretches of Cunningham's dance are often redeemed solely by this factor, by their laborious incorporation of difficult physical

movements into an aesthetic structure which is constantly threatening to collapse into mere prose gymnastics. For though he displays on occasion an inspired sense of timing and a controlling knowledge of his special audience (which looks as if the Village coffee-houses had emptied out for the night but does contain an unusually high proportion of practicing artists) he has next to no natural stage ability. Add to this the fact that his power of social observation is minimal (though in "Minutiae" he does abstract a glittering pattern from the movements of people walking) and that one rarely feels in his work the rhythmic propulsion of an unconverted animal or emotional drive, and the special nature of his ability and problems becomes plain.

For Mr. Cunningham is essentially something at once new, simple and fundamental, a pure lyric-abstract dancer of immense talent and almost unearthly luminosity perpetually lost in a variety of kinetic modes none of which quite suit him. He lacks the brilliant spectacular qualities necessary to ballet as he lacks the tortured inwardness and weight necessary to fuel the expressionist dance. But by working constantly in and through a range of styles which are handled fluently but without intimacy (like the speech of a linguist who has never had a native country) he has succeeded, if only in brief passages, in evolving something absolutely his own, as magnificent and valid as anything done by his predecessors.

It can be seen at its maximum in a work called "Septet" when, after ranging through a variety of different dance modes, the group of six dancers glides unnoticeably into a formation like nothing that has gone before and like nothing else I have seen, as if they had constituted themselves a new polity of human beings based on the preternatural suppleness of each member. Distended and limber, moving through such lithe distortions that they seem taken completely out of the realm of normal, physical life, they group and regroup according to unique, magical laws in one of the most astonishing adagios in dance.

A similarly impressive solo passage takes place in "Lavish Escapade" during which, emerging from a series of turns and rolls about the stage, Cunningham moves with beautifully timed abruptness to its very rim and stands like some vast bloated idol, bobbling, gesticulating and showering the audience with a variety of small, staggering, exquisitely original and grotesque movements of arms, head and shoulders. The peculiar excitement of this episode is due to the fact that if elements of mimesis, dramatic emotion or visual suggestion enter into the effect they do so only secondarily. The basic impulsion is from the purest, deepest centers of dance movement and like any artistic effect which results from successful, concentrated, absolutistic handling of a medium, it has something about it terrifyingly inscrutable, cold and even awesome.

It is the misfortune (discounting the value of adversity) of artists of Cunningham's generation that they are expected, if adequately endowed, to follow the pattern of their immediate forbears, producing at an early age what looks like a complete, self-sprung revolutionary

approach to their art. Of course, a good many of the artistic "revolutions" of the early part of the twentieth century, I think it is now apparent, are going to turn out to be written in water, leaving the future still to be established. Cunningham's dance, developing late in his career, beaten out under the harrowing pressures of the moment, wandering dazedly through a labyrinth of motion with no guiding intellectual thread of any thickness, freighted with the peculiar scepticism, defeatism and humdrum doggedness of an age that has witnessed every variety of original and freakish aesthetic display, seems to have struck, almost by accident, to the very rock-bottom of the art, sending forth, in its climactic moments, gleams of a purity and intensity qualitatively different from anything which has gone before and which may well be the beginnings of a new, unshakeably valid mode of physical expression.

Simply as a dancer, Cunningham has lost little of his youthful grace and charm and gained enormously over the years in strength and taste. He was ably assisted by a corps of six gifted and hard-working, remarkably fresh and precise dancers. The lights, décor and costumes all contributed to set off the dances effectively but with a minimum of distraction and the music was brilliantly performed by John Cage and David Tudor. Most of the music was by Cage or in the style that has come to be identified with his name. What the values are of that music standing alone is too complicated a subject to deal with here. An undanced duet consisting mostly of lengthy silences and single struck notes on the "prepared" pianos was heavily booed: by rival musicians, I surmise, rather than reactionary listeners (you couldn't get an ordinary art-audience to boo these days if you threw rocks at it). It still seems to me perfect for Cunningham's dance, helping to stimulate and enliven the audience, yet, in accord with the expressionist creed, doing nothing to support the dancer or pull the dance out of its own proper orbit.

The career of Jean Erdman, while it runs closely parallel to that of Cunningham, has actually followed a very different line of development. Cunningham, as personality and dancer, has always seemed immensely, if not functionally, superior to any vehicle that he has created for himself or that has been found for him, while the most salient quality of Miss Erdman's development has been the equivalence between her work and her ability. From the very outset, her art has been coherent, economical in the highest degree and consummate in a field in which the opposite qualities are almost the invariant rule. But she danced with Martha Graham during approximately the same period that Cunningham did, became independent at about the same time and, I imagine, for the same reason—to dance. For Miss Graham is primarily a theatre artist, less interested in using the resources of the human body *per se* than in immobilizing the body, passing it through almost static poses to project powerful dramatic effects. Miss Erdman, like Cunningham, is a dancer first of all, endowed with the ability to create in terms of corporeal motion and impelled to do so.

Miss Erdman, too, retained much of the Graham style, if less of the specific vocabulary, much of its total effect, its weightiness, solemnity, disdain of elevation and neglect of the human body as an instrument with which to surround areas of space in design. To the Graham style Miss Erdman brought contrasting qualities which served, not, as in the case of Cunningham, to produce a conflict that has taken years to resolve even partially, but to form immediately what seemed like an original, malleable and durable alloy. Having brought from her native Hawaii elements of the genuine hula, Miss Erdman turned the Graham style into something still powerful but undulant, sinuous, able to develop a choreographic concept in terms of a sustained *legato* of bodily movement. This fusion produced such memorable works as "Daughters of the Lonesome Isle", a solemn, plangent trio that unfolds the plight of three sexually unfulfilled women, the balefully effective "Transformations of the Medusa" and the wholly magnificent "Ophelia", a work to which I will return later.

In the modern dance, the solo female dancer, somewhat more than the male, tends to occupy a position of primitive religious significance, dancing out the conflicts and rituals of the female world, attraction and repulsion, barrenness and fertility, disintegration and renewal in terms of a fictive personality created for the stage out of a matrix of insight and experience. Thus, the Graham dance is largely controlled by the elemental figure of the vestal virgin, the incarnation of all that is desired by the male but is permanently beyond his reach, herself requiring nothing from the male but worship, the erotic relationship being, by definition, one of frustration. The *persona* through which Miss Erdman has functioned is seen most concretely in the image of the Medusa, the embodiment of the female attempting to transfix the male within the sphere of her attraction while she, herself, is at once attracted and repelled by male desire felt as potency, threat. It is a figure in motion rather than repose, which can be danced though it constantly seems about to slow down to a walk, to recede back into the erotic isolation and retracted sequences characteristic of the Graham dance.

Superficially, the Medusa figure would seem ridiculously inappropriate to any valid reading of Ophelia, the innocent and compliant victim of Hamlet's insane aggression. Not to detour into Shakesperian criticism, it seems to me at least possible to interpret her so that Hamlet's rages are not altogether unprovoked, to place her with a subtle guilt in the relationship if only as she functions as a key figure in the story of the Western world's vast violation of sexuality and as an artist's embodiment of female failure under the reign of the man-destroying Elizabeth. In any case, Miss Erdman's "Ophelia", forming a giant hyphen between the Elizabethan female and the woman of the twentieth century, seems to me to be one of the three indisputable classics of modern dance, the other two being Miss Graham's "Death and Entrances" and Miss Jane Dudley's "Harmonica Breakdown", all three being, in their own mode, completely realized, fulfilled works of art.

The value of Miss Graham's long work resides not primarily in the value of the physical movements *per se* but in the way these are used to saturate the atmosphere of the theatre with a single, nameless, morbid emotion. In terms of the evolving relations between aesthetic form and inner meaning of no great importance, in terms of sheer surface style, it is probably the most influential composition in physical movement of the twentieth century. "Harmonica Breakdown" is a sport, the single great event, never approached before or since, from a whole lost epoch of American "folk-say" art. It appears as if, just once in history, a dance of the most raw, bucolic, energy were put through the machinery of a highly-developed, civilized technique and multiplied thereby a hundredfold. "Ophelia," alone, gives one the sense of being a planned step in the history of art, focussing the critical attention of the spectator on the dancer as she moves on a long plane of reference to the past and future, inscribing the graph of her dance on the coordinates of literature, history and psychology. Every movement appears to have been scrutinized for originality and validity as it reveals a feminine figure being acted upon by powerful, conflicting forces, internal and external, which slowly twist and derange it till the dance closes upon a remarkable final image of static, maimed paralysis.

"Ophelia" is actually too well-composed and scrupulously executed a dance to function effectively as "theatre", a quality which is even more difficult to define in relation to dance than it is to drama. It is, in fact, a vexing question as to whether truly great dance, particularly of the modern variety, is not basically antitheatrical just as pure abstract painting tends to destroy "easel" art. Cunningham's recital contained, I believe, one specifically theatrical moment when he interrupted a dance and suddenly bared his teeth at the audience in a weird, snarling grin which probably expresses his attitude to the actual, prosy spectator whom he now defers to, now defies, frequently transcends but never wholly forgets.

Miss Erdman, however, seems to dance to an idealized onlooker, half-primitive, half perfectly civilized, who is moved only by fundamental biologic projections or the truths of composition. Form and content are both narrowed thereby and the basic conflict between them often solved too symmetrically, almost exactly equal weight being given to the creation of original movement in a logical, abstract design and to making all movement revelatory of character. In "Ophelia", the formal excitement, one feels, cannot be very intense if it never interferes with the psychologic development, and no matter how deeply felt the torments of the character may be one cannot be greatly moved by them because they never break into the lucid, perfectly-planned flow of the movement. It is very much the reaction one had to a work like Balanchine's "Apollo" and both are similar, schizophrenic dualities of mind and feeling hoisted on to the stage and kept going by brilliant manoeuvres of the imagination, fulfillments and turning points in the careers of their creators.

A number of odd transitions and compositions of disparate value

have brought Miss Erdman's work to the point at which it is today, a stage that is as puzzling and refractory to criticism as the earlier work was accessible. Miss Erdman's recent concert² (also I believe her first in quite a period) consisted of three rather short works and gave one throughout the impression of an artist in difficulties, a definitely major artist coping with major difficulties, but nervously and uncertainly. The recital consisted of three pieces none of which were very long, a duet for flute and dancer (with the flutist on stage) to music by Ezra Laderman, "Changingwoman" (Cowell) and "Harlequinade" (Laderman). The most notable and perhaps the only clear-cut gain Miss Erdman seems to have made over the years is simply in the nature of the personality that she presents to the audience. She appears now as a figure of unambiguous femininity, highly-evolved and delicate but with the tensile strength and sheen of silk, intensely corporeal but elusive and unfamiliar. Modern dance has always been somewhat involved in psychoanalysis or at least has had behind it the notion that art and the development of human personality are inextricably bound up with each other, so that we can regard the changes in Miss Erdman's stage character, if we accept the view, as a kind of artistic triumph. But along with the disappearance of the earlier, ambivalent figure seems to have gone the inventive, logical, if one will, masculine intelligence that made her one of the most obviously gifted of our composers. Simply as choreography, the "Duet for Flute and Dancer" is a slight work, bare, repetitious and dependent for effect, apart from occasional variations of rhythm or motion, chiefly on Erdman's presence, the highly individualized grace of her movements and a diffused sense of brilliance and easy mobility.

"Changingwoman", in seven parts, relies somewhat on the same qualities but, reenforced by the superb Cowell music which rises under the dance like a foundation of iron, weaves long passages of patterned leg motions into a significant totality. Periodically, Miss Erdman interrupts "Changingwoman" with eery, throaty cries of a quality at once archaic and animal which I found immensely effective. The composition as a whole, like some of the later paintings of Jackson Pollock, seems to me so experimental as to be almost impossible to judge and for much the same reasons. The specific, technical point of Miss Erdman's early departures from the Graham style was (in a manner precisely analogous to Pollock's departure from School of Paris abstraction in some of his early work) the reassertion of the importance of the artistic unit, the single movement and the dance-moment, to build compositions which would be solidly meaningful from beginning to end without ever lapsing into the literary dependence from which Graham, Wigman and others presumably rescued the dance. Now again she has turned towards a form in which the impact of the single movement and gesture has been immeasurably reduced and it is the "overall effect" that counts, the dance unit being not merely of low or erratic voltage and the structure weak as they are in the Graham dance, but both actually having

²Brooklyn Academy of Music, March 23, 1957.

no proper aesthetic existence. There are no real meaningful moments, no beginning, no middle or end, no contours or contrasts developed in relation to the clock-time of the work. It is a kind of flat confrontation of the audience by a specially developed personality in its own private world existing wholly out of relation to the world of physical extension and psychological duration. The repetition of similar, unspectacular movements creates a sense of absolute stillness through which impersonal phases of being blow like the wind through a field of grain, almost without the will of the artist.

The resemblances to late Pollock painting are, I think, plain. Both destroy all ordinary sense of space and time by not allowing any stroke, stress or shape to have any aesthetic relation to the spatial or temporal frames which contain them. By deliberately abdicating from the conventional privileges of the artistic form, they negate all kinaesthetic or empathic communion with the spectator which must take place within the familiar dimensions of ordinary life. The result is a kind of relation between the artist and audience so different from what has gone before that one wonders if any common qualities are left and whether so radical a surgery on existing art forms (and, by implication, on human relations) is necessary to preserve and advance powers of the sensibility that exist, apparently, under great threat and are sufficiently important to these artists to necessitate such a sacrifice. It is still too early to attempt to answer these complex questions, but "Changingwoman" does bring them to the fore with a peculiar sharpness, compelling one to think about and mull over one's impressions of this strange and moving work long after it has ended.

Since it seems to deal with matters of crucial import in general and to Miss Erdman in particular, it is something of a misfortune that we have no other works in this genre to help us understand and evaluate it. "Harlequinade", a première, is one of a class of compositions that have appeared on Miss Erdman's programs in the past and seem to represent a deliberate attempt to create along more conventional, social lines. Except for a generalized sense of skill and dexterity, the sudden shifts and surprises that are never wholly absent from the work of a choreographer of the first rank, and some genuinely witty moments in the final section, it was not especially noteworthy and seemed to satisfy its requisites by obligation rather than desire. I thought Mr. Laderman's music, especially by contrast with Cowell's perfectionist clangors, uninspired and not clearly related to the dance ideas despite the fact that it represents an effort to integrate the work of choreographer and composer more closely than in the past. Laderman apparently contributes to the choreography, marking the entrances and exits for dancers in his scores as if they were additional instruments. He does actually bring about a closer interplay between dancers and instruments, but at such a reduction of contrast between dance and music and lessening of the dancer's role as to offset the little that is gained thereby.

It is hard to imagine a greater contrast to the work of Cunningham

and Erdman than can be found in a recent recital given by a young dancer, Miss Edith Stephen³. I know nothing of her history and training but her entire approach to dance, to art and life make it appear as if she hailed from another continent. Briefly, where Cunningham and Erdman have staked everything on the individual apart from or against society, Miss Stephen has done exactly the reverse—if that is conceivable. Her four solo works contained scarcely a single original movement, hardly a passage that indicated any depth of individual feeling or sincerity, and were marked by a general poverty of invention. They were, however, extremely lucid, fluent, instantaneously assimilable and not without a certain unified force of style and presentation.

Miss Stephen's execution is likewise clean, accurate and superficial, the body from knees to thorax seeming utterly undeveloped, rigid, unable to function itself and rarely used to lend support or psychical depth to the many arm gestures and kicks that are frequently substituted for choreography. In a work called "Mystery" these movements are so detached from any rhythmic support that they look like the meaningless motions of a careful politician speaking on television. In "Mr. Bong", done to Kenneth Fearing's rowdily American "Dirge" recited in stage British, simple kicks, arm thrusts and body bends are forced into dance-satire through literary facial expressions, mugging. Two compositions in folk-dance genre are done with as little of the abandonment, the rhythmic intoxication that is the hallmark of folk dancing, as is possible without utterly losing their right to be included in the category. Yet all four compositions, by virtue of their clear phrasing, careful execution, communicability and completeness make a definite impact that cannot be dismissed as unaesthetic.

If, in Miss Stephen's solos, "the blemishes stand up and shout", in her group works they recede into the background of one's awareness though they never quite disappear. Original movement, rhythmic propulsion, individual conception are plainly missing from the group dances, too, but we are also engaged in watching something at which Miss Stephen shows a talent not readily discernible in her solos. It is a talent not for creating movement but for establishing significant relations between movements in space and time, for dance not as the expression of emotion or the display of the human body but as a very specialized visual offering wherein the spectator is stimulated to intense contemplation by the sense that his social self, or that area of it which is not quite clear in his consciousness, is being represented and given meaning through an objectification in aesthetic form. It is an effect which can also be found in UFA cartoons, certain *New Yorker* drawings, or, on a higher level, the paintings of Beckman, Dubuffet or Dufy. Indeed, if Miss Stephen were a conscious aesthetician, she could argue that what seem like her defects are actually virtues if one grants the validity of her genre and finds modern society devoid of precisely those qualities which she cannot project because they literally do not exist within the field of an art which has as its basic unit the socialized individual and never sees

³Kaufmann Concert Hall, YM-YWHA, March 31, 1957.

either noun or adjective as an entity in itself. Some such assumption is certainly implicit in the work of the three painters I have mentioned and acts to give their work a unique coherence and definition.

The result, in Miss Stephen's case, with a vastly different environment to work with, may be seen in a composition called "Mask", which opens with two pairs of dancers arranged in a static pose upon a stage bathed in lurid purple light. The members of each pair stand so that their bodies slant tautly away from each other and the couples are located at the opposite ends of a long diagonal to compose a typical surrealist image, typical not of dancing or the stage but of 1920 painting, "avant-garde" cinema and even high-fashion advertising illustration. It has therefore a certain novelty and relevance as spectacle which is steadily increased as the partners pull away and circle stiffly about each other or as the couples shift tensely within their fixed spheres. With the agoraphobic space of surrealism and its sense of trapped, mutilated sexuality toned down so that one has left the charm of the spatial relations with only the faintest echo of the attendant terrors, one might have here the kinetic externalization of the inner world of two frustrated suburban couples gyrating slowly amidst a décor of "modernage" furniture and Modern Museum reproductions that seem simultaneously to anticipate, engender and reflect their lives.

In another work, called "Mass", the audience might be watching itself slowly decompose into sociologic trends paced out by pseudo-individuals strung in streptococcus-like patterns. Such is the effect Miss Stephen manages to create as five dancers in a line cross through another line, walking, shuffling or skipping simply and with no great force. People watching people watching people all going nowhere slowly and sadly through revolving doors, up escalators, into and out of stores, houses, each other's lives, linked together by trends and circumstances rather than feeling or purpose. Miss Stephen does not react violently to social phenomena as do the painters I have mentioned and then construct a frame of acceptance; she merely represents, with almost as little emotion as her subjects, her chief contribution being the ability to transcribe these phenomena into dance terms and organize them into patterns with as little loss as possible of their intrinsic quality.

I don't know if Miss Stephen's peculiarly contemporary verism is conscious or accidental, its values due more to luck or design, or if my impressions correspond to anything in her mind, but it does strike me as fraught with possibility—equally likely to collapse into feeble chaos, retreat towards the sterile glitter of Broadway or venture further into new territory and emerge as serious art. It is, indeed, one of the virtues of modern dance that it forces all its protagonists, no matter how imaginative or remote in temperament, into contact with the issues and alternatives of the living present. They tend increasingly to function as the indispensable assault troops of culture, for no conquest of the mind or imagination is truly complete till it has been established as a capacity of the human body.

KENNETH B. SAWYER

Painters Over Seventy-Five

IN A SOCIETY run mad with *youth* ('Painters Under 35', *etc.*; it isn't difficult to see where *this* could lead), it is more than a little ironic that the most flourishing shows of the season were by artists over seventy-five (this too could start a dangerous trend, of course). Obviously, I mean the Picasso 75th Anniversary Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, and the Hans Hofmann Retrospective at the Whitney.

In regarding Picasso, critics are apt to be either arch or obsequious, apt to confuse the man with the work. I confess that I find the two inextricable in a very special sense. Had Picasso not been born the twentieth century would have been forced to invent him: he has become for us the Ideal Artist, the Proto-Painter. The middle-class birth, the academic prodigies of childhood, the rebellion in youth, the cheerful poverty of early manhood, the rough camaraderie of the *cafés*, the mistresses, the cannonball success, and, above all, the *oeuvre*, always brilliant, never failing to astonish, always beyond and a bit to the left of his contemporaries even into old age—all this is myth-inspiring. Nor has Picasso shown much reluctance in the face of his legend (was it Françoise Gilot who said, "It is difficult to live with a monument"?); he has cultivated it not so much for theatrical effect, but because he is, genuinely—for the first half of the century, at least—the Proto-Painter.

What he may be for the second half is problematic. It is true that suburban guest-rooms still flaunt prints of wistful blues and roses (what ever happened to those Degas dancers?), and books on his life and art appear with monotonous regularity on publishers' seasonal lists, but I left the Museum of Modern Art after a final viewing with the sense that I had witnessed history, recent not current. It was, in many respects, a work of art in itself; Mr. Barr's selection was conscientious, and sometimes astute (though one wishes he had been less scrupulous in his desire not to repeat sections of the 1939 Retrospective).

Yet something has happened since 1939. Perhaps it is that the present generation has become accustomed to sterner fare than Picasso has provided. The Cubist oils wear well—perhaps a bit too well; they are, for the most part, sufficiently complex to sustain interest despite the monotonous (by now) predictability of their devices, and the low-keyed color of the 1910-12 pieces seems altogether right (the earth-tones of this period have mellowed into what used to be called 'Old Master' colors). The slightly later works, particularly the collages, still seem miraculous—the 1914 "Head" from the Penrose Collection, for example, is as surprising as a Motherwell—and curiously undated compared with the oils, but elsewhere, as in "Woman in an Armchair," the ideas seem forced, the total picture contrived.

The fine, 1925 "Three Dancers" holds its wall against all comers; since it is among the most imitated (commercially) of Picassos, I was surprised to find it still vital and fresh—its Madison Avenue imitations lag far behind it in elegance, far less in strength. Picasso's feeling for *décor* is strongest in the late Cubist pieces, but it is only slightly less apparent in the 'Blue Period'. There is, in fact, a close relationship between the arrangement of positive-negative space in "Woman Ironing" (just saved from mawkishness by the strength of the drawing), and the 1914 "Portrait of a Girl". The same is almost equally true of "Harlequin," painted in Paris the following year. All three are composed in oblique, vertical masses, with the surrounding negative areas firmly interlocked with the predominant forms. While sculpturally rendered, "Woman" suggests that Picasso had already begun to explore the possibility of narrowing the enclosing space—a device that was fully developed three years later in "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" and "La Grande Danseuse" (surprisingly not included in the Modern's show).

Cubism in its several avatars has been discussed—and exhibited—to the point of absurdity. I do not deny the importance of the movement; neither do I deny that it produced a number of first-rate (and a few great) pictures, but I left the Anniversary Exhibition persuaded that the technical innovations, the reduction of forms to salients, the anti-color, later, the turn to prismatic color, were a bit beside the point at this stage of the century. Cubism was very much easel painting, and, for the most part, in the great Renaissance tradition; its contributions, particularly the narrowing of illusionistic space, have been so thoroughly assimilated, and so further developed by American vanguard painters, that we find it old-fashioned and often more than a little slick. It is ironic that Picasso, together with Braque, and a little later Léger and Gris, in making obsolete the *aperçus* of Barbizon, took the first steps on his own journey to obsolescence. This, of course, in the sense that every creative genius destroys part of that which produced him, and must himself be partly destroyed by what comes after.

Perhaps the climax of Cubism was the Fontainebleau "Three Musicians". Both major versions were in the Modern's survey, and the opportunity to see them together was one of the high spots of the show, for they offer an interesting paradox, as well as an insight into the nature of Picasso's subsequent development. The Philadelphia version is formally the more complex picture. While its figures are rather more literal than in the Modern's canvas, the depth is almost non-existent, and the colors higher-keyed in the manner of pure Cubism. The more famous "Musicians" from the Museum of Modern Art Collection has been simplified, despite the addition of a dog, and the interplay of planes is more daringly achieved. But in it Picasso has returned to depth once more—as if presaging the "Mother and Child" series, or the architectonic monsters of Dinard and after. While it is true that Picasso never—particularly in his drawings and temperas—wholly abandoned sculptural form, most of the major oils, 1907-15,

seem collage-like in their arrangement. The Modern's "Three Musicians" has in it those first symptoms of the later style lacking in the Philadelphia version.

The "Mother and Child" oils, and the monumental female figures that appeared at about the same time, owe a small debt to the 1906 drawings; the distinction between them is one of impact. The earlier pieces have about them a primitive strength which, in my opinion, the later essays lack. The post-Cubist women have an almost classic finesse, but they seem tumid rather than strong, sentimental rather than passionate. Perhaps sensing this weakness, Picasso turned almost abruptly to that generation of magnificent monsters that have become, to the lay mind, the symbols of his art. The marvelous "Three Dancers," despite its elegant overtones of Cubism, is probably his most important treatment of the female figure after "Les Femmes d'Alger," and, in a different way, nearly as successful. The remarkable, small "Crucifixion," dated 7 February, 1930, is possibly the strongest of Picasso's "violent" paintings, "Guernica" notwithstanding. Its size (20" x 26") is misleading as are its colors (strangely unviolent within the context of the picture). It is a curious *mélange* of elements literal and figurative, grotesque and lovely; it also provides a clue to Picasso's success in capturing the moment of horror. Simultaneity: not that of Cubism, in which one views a figure, object, or set of objects from many directions at the same time, but that of the Medieval illumination, in which many events chronologically unrelated occur at once in a single illustration in order to provide a kind of literary sequence. Obviously, Picasso accomplishes this in his own way—with a series of formal as well as anecdotal climaxes operating simultaneously across the canvas—but the device was old when Simone Martini made use of it.

Aside from "Guernica," his best-known painting of the thirties is probably "Girl Before a Mirror." A part of the Museum's regular Collection, it has been discussed widely in print during the past decade. But what most of its defenders have failed to remark in it is Picasso's growing tendency to strain after decorative effects with a flurry of bravura devices. These devices, however brilliantly accomplished, cannot disguise the paucity of ideas more and more apparent in his work since the late thirties. From about 1935, it seems that fancy began to replace imagination and whimsey will.

The impact of "Guernica" on a democratic world facing ruin was profound, and the shouts of 'Masterpiece!' drowned out for nearly ten years those more reasonable whispers that declared it agile, but not quite prime Picasso. Formally, the painting is as classic as a David, and in places just as congested. The central area, for example, lacks both the tension of planes and the formal ambiguity of "Les Femmes d'Alger," not to mention the free-swinging vigor of its brushing. The simultaneity of climaxes, because of the similarity of each shape to the next, fails to carry its effect to the same degree that it did in "Crucifixion" eight years earlier. If it was a *felt* painting—and I see no cause (or possibility) to challenge Picasso's motives in doing it in the manner that he did—it is also a cerebral painting

in the sense that 'picturing' is basically a cerebral act. Yet the fact that it was executed exclusively in black, white, and gray (Picasso has never been perfectly at ease with color) strongly suggests that it began as primarily a personal expression. It may be that by 1938, his projections had already become more automatic than compelled.

Since "Guernica," Picasso has painted little that commands the attention, that implies the power of imagination, to the extent that the earlier work did. With the exception of a few oils and drawings from the "Dora Maar" series—including some of the loveliest portraits he has ever done—the recent work seems aimed at a middle ground between the masterpiece and a caricature-of-the-artist-as-an-old-man. "Night Fishing at Antibes," while structurally ambitious, is lightweight; "War" and "Peace" (not included in the Museum of Modern Art show) proved ineffectual as propaganda ("War" is far more satisfactory than "Peace") and bitterly disappointing as paintings; "The Studio" series proves the Master as nimble a draftsman as ever and as sly a wit, but it attempts too little; "The Women of Algiers, After Delacroix" seems more ingenious than profound (the series reminds me of Beethoven's *Variations on a Theme from Don Giovanni*, not of the late quartets).

It is unfortunate that Mr. Barr did not succeed in borrowing more of the major bronzes according to his original plan; in photographs, at least, they seem formidable—far stronger than the recent oils. I also regret that he chose to overcrowd the galleries, a thing rarely done at the Modern; a smaller, more meticulously selected show would have been of greater benefit both to Picasso and the viewer. But these are minor qualifications: the stupendous task of assembling such an exhibition, the expense of money and energy involved, has been justified in what will probably remain for years to come America's definitive view of Picasso.

Finally, what is there to say of an artist about whom everything one chooses to say is true (conversely, there is sure to be a plate in Zervos that will make hash of the most cautiously reasoned position)? That he is the master draftsman of the age? that his discoveries have changed the face of Western art? that his hand gave to everything it touched the shape of his genius? that he is a monument to, a symbol of, art in the twentieth century? Yes, all this is true. But be wary, critic, for the opposite may be no less true.

Until fairly recently, critics were apt not to regard Hans Hofmann at all. Or if they did, it was likely to be in some shotgun essay on second generation Expressionists, or as a willful and malign influence on the artistic youth of America. Later, one was accustomed to hear him discussed as a 'teacher-painter', whose gifts with the brush lagged far behind his gifts for pedagogy, but whose heart was in the right place, and who apparently felt no rancour when his students outstripped him in the race for fame. Curiously, few of his students seemed to feel that way, and lately critics and public have been coming around. 'Painter' has begun to precede 'teacher', and in a few extreme instances 'teacher' has been

dropped altogether (a real *gaffe*: he has probably taught more people how to look at pictures than any man in the past century).

The recent Whitney Hans Hofmann Retrospective is not his first, it is his fifth; probably it is not even his most interesting (I think the Addison Gallery show of 1948 can claim that), but I think it by far the most important, since it is bound to lay once for all those ghostly whispers of his artistic ineptitude. Moreover, it contains a greater percentage of recent canvases than the others, and Hofmann is a man who improves with age.

His life has not followed the Picassoid or Proto-Painter pattern; he manifested little of that compulsive drive to paint from his earliest childhood (he didn't begin his formal training until he was eighteen). Hofmann's early orientation was scientific, with particular emphasis on electronics—by the time he was twenty he had invented a primitive radar device, a wireless electric bulb, and a portable freezing unit. That he was also a painter of talent is evidenced by the tender, if academic, "Portrait of Miz" (Mrs. Hofmann), not included in the Whitney survey, and that he was aware of the movements in Paris is amply proved by the sensitive *pointillist* "Self-Portrait" of the following year (1902). Indeed, so impressive was his early work that it won the attention of Phillip Freudenberg, a Berlin collector, whose generous patronage allowed Hofmann ten relatively worryless years of study and painting in Paris. Unfortunately, only a very few pictures survived the chaos of World War I, hence it is impossible to evaluate the effect of pre-war France on his restless mind. The evidence of "Green Bottle" (1921), with its flattened planes and its narrowed space, shows a lively, but not slavish interest in Cubism, and many of the later oils indicate that he had looked very carefully at Matisse, but it is impossible to infer a consistent line of development from the meagre store of work remaining.

If World War I destroyed most of his early output, it created Hofmann the teacher. Freudenberg was compelled to withdraw his financial support, and to support himself and his wife, Hofmann opened his first school at Number Forty Georgenstrasse, Munich. Those ideas, germinating since the Paris days, found words; the Hofmann philosophy of painting—his 'cosmology'—began to emerge, and in a surprisingly short time he had become one of the most controversial—and popular—teachers in Europe. But clearly so stiff a regimen of teaching was to affect his work; the years between 1915 and 1931 were to be the least productive of his life.

When, in 1931, he was invited for the second time to teach the Summer Session at the University of California in Berkeley, he was offered an opportunity to exhibit his drawings at the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco. It was his first one-man show in more than twenty years. Remaining in the United States, he continued to teach, first at the Art Students League, later at his own schools in New York and Provincetown. More important, he began to paint again with all the exuberance that characterizes his every gesture. His progress was remarkable, and by the time of his first New York exhibition (at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of this

Century Gallery), he was perhaps the first master Abstract Expressionist. Other exhibitions followed, and the cult of Hans Hofmann had begun.

It is popular to regard each Hans Hofmann painting as pure energy mustered into two-dimensional form. This equation is accurate so far as it goes, but it begs the question of spirituality ('the emotional and intellectual synthesis of relationships perceived in nature, rationally or intuitively'), never far from Hofmann's mind. It is also necessary, in order to appreciate the complexity of his work, to understand its proximity to nature (I do not mean the literal image), and the underlying rules of color which rule his forms. Hofmann is a *pure colorist* (as opposed to a *tonal colorist*), who uses color to serve 'simultaneously a plastic and psychological purpose'; one set of vibrations leading directly into the next with a logic akin to that of music. The effect of stunning vigor his oils produce is due mainly to the fact that we have, during the past half-century, accustomed ourselves to *tonalities*—impure colors used to project degrees of dark and light.

If color is the controlling element in Hofmann's cosmology, nature is its basis. All art stems directly from nature—either the object perceived or the synthesis of object and fantasy in the creative act. Form—although Hofmann seldom uses the word—is determined by observable laws, and subject to the discipline of color. Thus the creative act is an act of purification, actual not ritual. If at first a Hofmann oil appears arbitrary or unplanned, scrutiny usually proves it something quite different. In "X-1955" for example, what seems an accidental success of shape and color planted squarely on the picture plane, gradually surrenders its formal plan: slightly to the left of center on a canvas 60"x 48", red and blue diagonals cross; the red, as overlaying element, would normally dominate had Hofmann not favored the slant of the blue with a 'leading' rectangle of yellow at the crux. Continuing the trajectory of the blue band is an arch-shaped form, echoing and distorting the dominant red. The plan is simple, and would probably remain static were it not for the clockwise activity, sometimes overlaid, sometimes brought up from beneath the surface, which is halted abruptly by a white patch at the lower right of the canvas. The white, supplemented by a grid of oblique blue lines, leads the eye back to the red bar, where the movement of the painting once more begins. The visual control is augmented by texture, but never in violation of Hofmann's color precepts.

Yet for all the wrenching impact of pure color, one finds little violence in Hofmann's art. Occasionally, a form, disturbing in its organic anonymity, will emerge from the swirls of pigment, or a title will sound a warning chord, but violence is basically destructive, and every stroke Hofmann lays on is sheer affirmation, a paean to life. Exuberance, vigor, abundance are the seminal values of his cosmology, but elegance, too, is present. Not the elegance of current *école de Paris* 'picturing', but that elegance that springs from a creative intellect utterly at home in the world. I think the 1952 paintings ("The Sun," "Burst into Life") exhibit the quality best; without being in any sense 'light', they seem to hang in an atmosphere scoured clean of nonessential matter—as if their energy alone were

sufficient to recreate a universe. The recent work is more tightly constructed, with surprising squares and rectangles of pure color patched into the composition as if acknowledging man's place in an efflorescent world. They are not, to me, the best of Hofmann, but they are among the most vital pictures being produced today.

The new Whitney has been the despair of many a painter. At times the installation policy has seemed altogether diabolic; worse, the lighting is as relentless as an *auto da fé*, wrenching forms apart, wringing the color into helpless masses of gray, flattening the life out of well-planned structures. The paintings of Hans Hofmann do more than survive the ordeal, they give back better than they receive. At seventy-seven, he is among the most vigorous of our talents, and certainly one of the crucial painters of our time.

Reviews

ROY HARVEY PEARCE

Romantics, Critics, Historicists

“L’influence de mes contemporains l’emporte, dit-il tout haut et avec un rire amer. Parlant seul avec moi-même, à deux pas de la mort, je suis encore hypocrite. . . O dix-neuvième siècle!”

—*Julien Sorel, awaiting his execution.*

THIS BIT FROM ONE OF Julien Sorel’s last soliloquies will serve well enough to bind up, however loosely, the parcel of books to be reviewed here.¹ Its basic ambiguities—what *did* the century do to Sorel? what did he think it had done? what does Stendhal want us to think it had done? what did it do to Stendhal and what did he do to it?—are of the types which face the critic who, in his inevitable role as historian, would seek to relate himself at once to his present and to his past. The questions which he would ask develop in an almost dialectical progression: What did the nineteenth century, especially that part of it which we call the Romantic Period, make of its poets? What did they make of it? Then: What does it make of us, in our century? And what do we make of it? These are, above all, the questions asked in the five essays in historical criticism which I am to discuss. For the first three, they are the only questions; for the last two, although they are just some questions among many, they are nonetheless central. Asking them, the critic in effect asks how historical criticism itself has managed to conceive of its subject, and how it might do so in the future.

The Major English Romantic Poets is, according to its Introduction, a “frank evaluation, in terms of present-day standards and needs, of the English Romantic Period as a whole and of each of its five leading poets.” Like all such collections, it is in tune with the Crisis of our Culture, and it recommends therapy:

Readers of this book will be interested to see how many of our contributors have in one way or another commented on the positive qualities of the Romantic poets. . . . It is just here perhaps. . .

¹THE MAJOR ENGLISH ROMANTIC POETS, edited by Clarence D. Thorpe, Carlos Baker, and Bennett Weaver. Southern Illinois University Press. \$5.50. SYMBOLISME FROM POE TO MALLARMÉ: THE GROWTH OF A MYTH, by Joseph Chiari. Macmillan. \$6.00. THE ROMANTIC SURVIVAL: A STUDY IN POETIC EVOLUTION, by John Bayley. Essential Books. \$2.90. ERAS AND MODES IN ENGLISH POETRY, by Josephine Miles. University of California Press. \$4.00. THE FUNCTION OF CRITICISM: PROBLEMS AND EXERCISES, by Yvor Winters. Alan Swallow. \$3.00.

that our own generation may derive much from the Romantics. We find the injunction "Accentuate the Positive" in a popular song; but many of our writers embody only those negative convictions which Karl Shapiro has called the trademark of modernism.

Unhappily, this is a fair sampling of the mood of at least half of the essays, and also of their tone. The characteristic tactic of this unhappy half is to prove, somehow, that twentieth-century poets, critics, and philosophers, so often nominally anti-Romantic, are actually latent Romantics, critically sick in their very latency. If only, as two essays argue, Mr. Brooks (who is himself present in the collection, in a modest reaffirmation of Keats' relevance to modern poetry) would realize that the Romantic poetics was organismic too, and that contemporary theories of irony and the like are really only "negative" versions of Keats' theory of poetic "intensity", etc., etc. Or, conversely, as another essay argues, if we are engaged by the thought of Julian Huxley, J. B. S. Haldane, Claude Bernard, Santayana, Whitehead, Schweitzer, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, etc., etc., then we have, willy-nilly, admitted that we need Wordsworth, who is all these and more. The net effect is to exhibit a fear that Romanticism has no justification except as we can be Romantics *right now*. The obvious fact—that we can't be, because we aren't—is forgotten. And the Romantic Poets—who can't be modern, because they aren't—are forgotten too. What we are presented with is a series of indefinite, totally heuristic metamorphoses, many of them beginning like this: "It is surely one of the monstrous ironies of our time, the present critical age of Irony and Ambiguity, the Period of the Poetic Paradox, that Byron, master of these, should have been so neglected by the new critics. . . ."

Happily, this is not the mood or the tone of the whole collection. And some of the reappraisers do their job well indeed, for example: Josephine Miles, magisterially, on Wordsworth's poetic mode (of which more below); Herbert Marshall McLuhan, sharply, on Coleridge as progenitor of our literature "of the spiritual and intellectual quest"; D. G. James, succinctly, on the thought of Coleridge; R. D. Havens, massively, on real and imagined difficulties in Shelley's style; and W. J. Bate, inclusively, on the evolution of Keats' style. These pieces are not apologies for the Romantic Poet, nor, for that matter, for modern poetry and poetics either. The assumption that informs them is not that we live in a vacuum which the MLA abhors and which its representatives will fill with Romanticism; rather it is that it is a good thing to try to see past poets integrally and to try to learn to take them for what they are, even as we take ourselves for what we are. Here the MLA's calm, disengaged humanism takes over, and for the good.

In his *Symbolisme from Poe to Mallarmé: The Growth of a Myth*, Mr. Chiari has a pretty easy time of it demonstrating that Mallarmé's poetics and his poetry are not at all essentially Poe-esque, this in spite of Mallarmé's insistence that they were. Yet Mr. Chiari is not so much interested in

the "myth" of that influence as he is in the lesson of Mallarmé, which is a lesson of literary history: "Each poem [of Mallarmé] is a new philosophical suicide of the poet's self, and therefore an abolition of time in order to reach the transcendental self, a kind of phoenix-like operation to rise from nowhere to nowhere." This, in truth, is "very remote from Poe's search for indefiniteness and ideal beauty." There follows, accordingly, the symbolist version of the lesson of Romanticism itself.

Mallarmé was bent on a journey which obviously he would have made and in fact did make without Poe. The knowledge that another traveller had taken a similar road encouraged him and helped him by the trail he left behind. But Mallarmé soon overtook all forerunners and reached bourns which no human being had ever visited before; from these all he could do was to shout to his faithful disciple, Valéry, not to try to reach him who was already on the verge of the unavoidable abyss, but to leave him where he was and to continue on his journey alone along a path which was still open.

Such a conclusion is reached by what I can best describe as a phenomenological, as opposed to a functional-organic, reading of Mallarmé's work. (I am not expert enough in that work to judge Mr. Chiari's treatment of it in any except its own terms.) Mr. Chiari sees it in its symbolist context, but always makes of it something existential, a creating, as opposed to a creative, act. He views Poe's work in this light too, but as a phenomenon at most adjunctive to Mallarmé's. His Poe is defined, simply enough, as not-Mallarmé. This has to be, because the effect of Mr. Chiari's existentialist theorizing (he does much of it) about literary history is to make it impossible to relate the historical actuality of one poet to that of another. It seems possible only to speak of an actual poet and his "mythic" versions of poets who he thinks have influenced him. For Mr. Chiari, poems are existential forms which express essence; they can be only what they are and can have no real connection with anything outside themselves. In effect, the plenitude of history, literary and otherwise, is filled with a stream of monads who, even if they think they look at one another, look only upward, at essence and at Essence. Strictly speaking, then, there is no history, just a series of discretely unique events which in their human blindness cannot know that they are discrete. It is a powerful argument, powerfully argued. Armed with it, Mr. Chiari would give us a living, palpable Mallarmé, a poet whom we can look toward (as he looked toward Poe), even if he cannot look toward us. But then one wonders: Is this Mallarmé to be defined simply as not-Chiari? Is there no such thing as a living tradition? Is there no such thing as historical continuity? Is not Mr. Chiari's study, in its very urge to re-create Mallarmé at the expense of everyone else, an example of historical criticism *adust*? One says to oneself, impulsively, there must be a way, there has to be a way, to say of Mr. Chiari, "I refute him thus."

The Romantic Survival is a study of Yeats, Auden, and Thomas. Mr. Bayley begins by reminding us that the Romantic imagination had as its characteristically Coleridgean aim the transformation and possession of reality through the power of poetry. The danger was that the reality principle of the poet would be so weakened that all necessary contact with the actual world would be lost. Or, should the poet's imaginative power be Keatsian, a negative capability could issue into a kind of suicide, as it did, for Mr. Bayley, in the work of the French Symbolists. Only in the Romantic novel, that of Scott for example, were the recalcitrant demands of *Wirklichkeit*, everyday reality, strong enough to keep the later Romantic way adequately of this world. Now, according to this plot (for it is that, not an argument), Yeats early in his career almost committed a Symbolist suicide, but recovered sufficiently to write his middle and late poems, charging them, in their very transformative power, with a sense of this world. For Mr. Bayley, Auden's poetry, likewise transformative yet also this-worldly, is therefore Romantic; but with this difference, that Auden in both his psychoanalytic and his existentialist moods, refuses to take poetry with the authentic Romantic's deadly seriousness: moreover, "The subject matter of [his] poetry approaches that of the modern novel. . . ." And about Thomas's poetry Mr. Bayley cannot be so explicit; for he is the poet in whom negative capability (Ruskin's "pathetic fallacy" is another name for this, Mr. Bayley decides, and is perhaps a better term to apply to Thomas's work) has been maximized without being suicidal. He is "a laborious craftsman obsessed with the ways in which language can be brought more and more directly into contact with feelings and thought." It follows that the more direct the contact, and the expression, the less amenable to discursive criticism the poetry is. And so Mr. Bayley circles around a number of Thomas poems, occasionally darting in apperceptively to point his moral.

Mr. Bayley manages a fairly coherent view of the work of his three poets, but it is a view hardly in the perspective of the "Survival" in his title. For him "Romantic" is just a general classificatory term, which has a history, but which is apparently more interesting as classification than as history. The logical hiatuses in my summary fairly represent, I think, the logical hiatuses in his study. He has no sense for dynamics and continuities. In the end, it just doesn't really make much difference that he calls his poets Romantic. And, of course, it should.

The triumphant concern of Miss Miles' *Eras and Modes in English Poetry* (certainly the most important of these five books) is just this—the difference which it should, it can, it must make to us if we will "ask certain questions about poetry as history." She concludes in a generalizing chapter:

Perhaps poetry gives us history in an intensive form—the shape of values selected and stressed by artistic forces. Perhaps the terms

and structures which a poet most cares about tend to be those which a group, even an era, most cares about, as they represent the basic choices of the time. The language we speak, and even more the language we versify, may be seen to be loaded language, carrying the weight of chosen values.

And she ends with a careful outline of her study: one which reveals a wavelike movement from what she calls "clausal" to one which she calls "phrasal poetry," with eras of "balance" between. "Phrasal" poetry, as she has said earlier, "employs an abundance of adjectives and nouns, in heavy modifications and compounding of subjects, in a variety of phrasal constructions, including verbs turned to particles; it is a cumulative way of speaking." "Clausal" poetry "emphasizes compound or serial predicates, subordinate verbs in relative and adverbial clauses, action, and rational subordination; it is a discursive way of speaking. The first might say, 'Rising and soaring, the golden bird flies into the stormy night of the east'; the second if given the same terms would say, 'The golden bird rises and soars; it flies into the night which storms in the east.'" Some poets of the first type (Miss Miles discusses many more than these) are Milton, Prior, Gray, Akenside, Keats, Whitman, and Pound; some poets of the second type are Wyatt, Donne, Herrick, Gay, Coleridge, the Brownings, Hardy, and Frost. Some poets in the balanced mode are Spenser, Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope, Wordsworth, Shelley, Emerson, Emily Dickinson, Stevens, Yeats, and Eliot.

Miss Miles' study is thus programmatic, tied to a thesis and a theory. Hence it suffers in such gross outlining as this, in which a carefully wrought relief map is flattened out to the merest street index. It must suffice to say that, armed with word-counts and analyses of syntax, she works out from her phrasal-balanced-clausal theory to a series of richly evocative critiques in which she would give us a sense of the imaginative possibilities inherent in the poetic vocabulary of a given era and of the artistic realization of those possibilities. Above all, she is able to see the work of a poet or an era as a whole and to warn us against reading that work in terms of our own interests; indeed, she suggests often that, read with the proper kind of historical relativism, known in and of itself, as a whole, that work might enable us at once to deepen our own interests and to fulfill them, might make us more completely human. Properly, then, her historical criticism is subsumed under a wider, more complex, more dynamic sense of the absolute possibility of the imagination than is that of the either/or "positivistically minded" literary historians whom we have so freely damned—but, unhappily for our critical sensibility, only in the name of static, orthodox, fixed values in art. Her major figures are Donne, Dryden, Wordsworth, Hopkins, and Yeats; her major topics are a series of traditions—the classical, the sublime, the balladic, the Romantic—in their varying forms over five centuries of English poetry. She does not try to break down the received notion of eras, but rather tries to make that notion particular enough for the uses of historical

criticism. Her *Eras and Modes* culminates her previous studies of the language of poetry; once and for all it establishes the positive value of her exquisite sense for what I can only call the most common denominator: a statistically arrived at, imaginatively comprehended node of creation, communication, and understanding.

Her method is nowhere better exemplified than in the three chapters in which she strives, happily for the needs of this review, to help us come to grips with the Romantics, chiefly with Wordsworth—this last in an essay printed also in the MLA volume noticed above. She finds the “origins” of the Romantic Mode not in the sublimities and pseudo-sublimities of the pre-Romantics but in the ballad revival of their century. Rediscovery of the ballad made possible the major nineteenth-century achievement: “the lyrical narrative of dramatic confrontation.” The ideal type of Romantic poem she describes as follows: “. . . a sentence structure of dramatic confrontation, which employs more verbs than adjectives, more subordinate than serial constructions, more actions and arguments than descriptions and invocations. That is, the structure presents people in situations, with much suggestion and implication of surroundings, rather than surroundings with a suggestion of situation as the eighteenth century did. The focus has shifted to foreground figures. At the same time, the meter breaks, to allow for effects of silence as well as sound in the verse line.” Now, this is not precisely our picture of the Romantic poets, as Miss Miles is quick to point out. As with others whom she discusses, we have tended to cut them down to our size, seized upon the directness and power of their substantial imagery, read them as essentially “phrasal,” when, in their confrontative discursiveness, they are, with the principal exceptions of Keats, “balanced,” or even “clausal.” Wordsworth is Miss Miles’ chief case-in-point. It was he who “gave poetry the power to generalize about human nature subtly and consistently.” And: “This is the integral Wordsworth of *Prelude*, *Excursion*, sonnets, odes, from one end of his life to the other, the Wordsworth of faith as well as glee, the classicist [i.e., poet of the “balanced” mode] in an effort toward a difficult synthesis of human perceptions. This is the Wordsworth whose particularity of ego and observation is turned toward a poetry as general in abstraction as any we have. . . .” This is not the Wordsworth whom we delimit in our almost exclusive admiration for poems like “A slumber did my spirit seal.” Indeed: “The power of the Wordsworthian mode for our day is the mind’s excursive power, the change and commotion in the world of spirit. In its harmonious regularity and cumulative stress it demands meditation; in its accords, sympathy; in its balanced literalness, a steady observation. All these are difficult for us. An age of symbol, passion, and irony is not much good at a common view or a general concern or even a strong abstract statement in a determined meter. But we can learn. And Wordsworth’s can be the poetry not only from which, but toward which, we proceed.”

“We can learn.” I take it that this is the humbling, humanizing goal of proper historical criticism. It is a difficult sort of learning, one whose

rules we are again formulating, as we try to overcome our fear of literary history, as we begin to suspect that that fear has been a fear of history itself. Miss Miles' study, properly, turns up as many problems as it solves; its solutions are that valuable kind, in themselves problematic, so that the historical dynamism is kept going. As she says early in the study, she is primarily interested in *How*; she leaves open the question of *Why*. She moves toward a theory of *Weltanschauungen*; but her concerns are too particularly explicatory to let her go all the way. Hers is, perhaps, the Anglo-American analogue, chock-full of facts and figures carefully patterned, of the stylisticist-structuralist criticism, most of it centered on Romance literature, which we know best in the work of Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer, Stephen Gilman, and, in some of his moods, Harry Levin. Like them, she would give historical considerations a vital role in reading and knowing literature: value-charged then, *therefore* value-charged now.

The Function of Criticism is not one of Mr. Winters' major works. It is essentially a series of validating footnotes to his celebrated critical enterprise: the establishment of a theory of criticism which in its moral certitude would rise above the inevitable relativism into which historical criticism in general and Romantic poetics in particular seem always to get us. There is no hierarchy of relativisms for Mr. Winters, as there would be for the historical critic. For him all relativism corrupts; and any relativism corrupts absolutely, if only we look closely enough at the texts in question. Mr. Winters would scotch out such relativism. Yet in so doing, and his effort to do so is profound and powerful, he courts a great danger: that of scotching out part of the texts themselves, the historical part, the part which insists on stubbornly existing, being, working, and making sense, even when we would have it exist, be, work, and make sense otherwise—according to our heart's (or reason's) desire. What I find lacking in his criticism is an accounting for the positive survival-power of many such texts. I am sure that he would argue that if texts do not survive according to his prescription for survival, they should not survive, they cannot, they really do not. But I find that the texts remain; somehow they moved our ancestors, who were not necessarily less intelligent than we, and they may thereby move us.

Mr. Winters, to be sure, is, as always, concerned lest we be moved by the literary texts which are written according to a set of values to which he cannot subscribe. In point of fact, he often tries to account for the rise of those values, but only by way of showing them aberrational from right reason as he conceives of it. The first, titular essay in the volume (originally printed, as were three of the others, in this Review) is a combined autobiographical-theoretical exposition of his own poetics and the critical theory which necessarily follows. It is marked by a series of characteristically Wintersian asides which have at most only a kind of centrifugal relation to the main argument of the essay: the need for and the possibility of a poetics of right reason. The second essay, "The Audible

Reading of Poetry," attacks dramatic, expressive reading and presents Mr. Winters' own views on "formal" reading, this deriving from his theory of rigorous scansion, according to right reason. He argues that the inability of many of his contemporaries to read their poetry satisfactorily only demonstrates their inability to write it; for the good ear must also listen only to right reason. The third and fourth essays are downgrading analyses of the poetry of Hopkins and Frost; the downgrading is achieved by the sort of close reading which reveals a component of Romantic irrationality informing structure, metrics, and imagery. And the last, quite brief essay is a passing-in-review of some studies of Elizabethan prose and poetry. Mr. Winters finds little of critical value in them; for: "It is my conviction that one cannot write the history of poetry unless one can find the best poems. The best poems are the essential facts from which the historian must proceed."

These last two sentences sum up, I should judge, Mr. Winters' view of the problems of historical criticism. And, taken straight, they sum up a view to which no one could object. The difficulty arises, however, when one faces the fact that Mr. Winters' conception of "best" is such that it enables him to conceive of the literary past and its monuments not as they really were but as they should have been according to his conception of reason and morality. That conception is not fully developed anywhere in these essays; but it is there, everywhere, as in these words on *Macbeth*: "That which makes it a living simulacrum and a living judgment is the emotion resulting from [the] rational grasp of the theme. Ideally this emotion should be appropriate to our realization of the significance of the whole." There are other statements like this one; and the reader of Mr. Winters' earlier work, recognizing them, will sense again and again the terrible weight put on such terms as "judgment," "rational grasp," and "appropriate." That reader will know approximately what these terms are meant to convey; and he will, if he wishes, turn to earlier, fuller statements of their purport—especially those in *The Anatomy of Nonsense*. But he will, I believe, be left with a sense of dissatisfaction; for the terms are part of a structure of a more-or-less Thomistically inclined moral theory which, so far as my reading of Mr. Winters goes, has no dogma, no particularity, no specifically articulated version of the human situation at its base. The terms are always, I think, too general to command our assent either as moral imperatives or as modes of historical understanding. Yet to do the job which Mr. Winters would have them do, they must be that general, and thus cannot be immediately involved in the stream of intellectual and cultural history which they would serve to organize. It is certainly dialectically possible to judge historical events (of which poems constitute a major class) by the sort of moral theory which Mr. Winters' terms support. But one wonders: Is it dialectically possible then to derive that very theory from historical events so judged and, beyond that, to write the history of such events as though it were the normative expression of the theory? The difficulty arises out of the fact that Mr. Winters would discover

that absolutist rational morality expressed in the very continuum of history whose artistic productions he would judge by means of it. He thus is forced to arrange and to interpret historical events in such a way that they are found expressive of the very moral theory which has been his means of discovering that they exist and are worth judging. One most often objects not to Mr. Winters' judgments *per se*, but to the fact that his judgments lead him to a series of distortions of literary and intellectual-cultural history. He is unable to conceive of the historical event apart from his judgment of it. He is unable to conceive of understanding apart from judgment. The epistemological problem is a neat one: Certainly understanding and judgment are related; but the one does not necessarily issue into the other; the one does not necessarily exist solely for the sake of the other. Mr. Winters would have it otherwise—so much so that he almost always, so far as my reading of his work goes, buttresses his judgments with a review of the historical events which made for the moral (and thus, for him, for the rhetorical, stylistic, and structural) situation on which his judgment is to operate. The position, I think, is finally untenable, however many brilliant *aperçus* might be achieved in reaching it. For, operating from it, Mr. Winters is, willy-nilly, forced to distort the history which he would detail in order to support his so often dyslogistic judgments. Hence a reader (this reader) is quite often in the position of being convinced by Mr. Winters, but for reasons entirely apart from the historical analysis which he brings to bear in his criticism.

Here, for example, is part of the reprise of Romanticism with which Mr. Winters prefaces a portion of his study of Hopkins:

Historically, Hopkins belongs to the late Romantic period. The text-book dates for the Romantic Period (1798 to 1832) are merely an academic convention, designed primarily for the organization of university courses. The Romantic period began, one may reasonably say, in 1711, with the publication of Shaftesbury's *Characteristics*; it reached a succinct identity in the early 1730's with the publication of Pope's *Essay on Man*, more particularly with the third and fourth Epistles. In spite of contending forces, the Romantic movement has gained steadily in strength to the present time. The movement represents, essentially, a rebellion against the authority of reason in favor of the authority of impulse and emotion. In Pope this was a matter of theory, not of practice: Pope's practice was inherited from an earlier period and from better ideas. By the middle of the eighteenth century, with Gray, Collins, Smart, and others, it was a matter of both theory and practice, and practice has been more and more influenced into our time. . . .

To say this is to achieve sharpness and clarity, but at the expense of what I would wish for in an authentic sense of the period. This is in effect the translation—the blurring of distinction, for example, between Shaftesbury's moral sense and Smart's religiosity—of a period into a set

of concepts which are inadequate to communicate a sense of what it really was. However, I am not sure that Mr. Winters is interested in Romanticism as it really was—or in Emerson, or in the *Poema del Cid*, or in Homer (to take some other random examples of what I think are his historical misrepresentations) as they really were. I rather doubt it. Nonetheless, my point stands: that critical judgments which would take historical situations into account must take them fully into account, and with whatever relativism is called for—however much the judgments are thereby complicated.

Taking history fully into account—to do so would not necessarily preclude final judgments of the sort which Mr. Winters reaches. But it would, as I have said, necessarily make those judgments a little more complicated; it would, in short, complicate them morally, and so, since Mr. Winters' is a marvelously integrated and unified criticism, also further complicate them rhetorically, stylistically, and structurally. For with all his expert close reading of texts, he nonetheless tends to avoid the complications which a more solidly presented grasp of intellectual and cultural history would make for him. And I conclude that such complications are in Hopkins and in many others whom Mr. Winters has studied (and downgraded) for us—in them in such a way that the profoundest study of their work would be first, an act of commitment to their historical situation in all of its complications, and then, and only then, an act of judgment. Literature, I think, is more fecund of valid possibilities, as history is more fecund of valid possibilities, than Mr. Winters will allow. The critic must judge those possibilities in their expressive forms. But he cannot scale them according to a single, overly rigid, limiting theory of right reason and moral imperatives. Such simplifying organization can be avoided only by granting, at the outset, that the range of valid possibilities is great indeed, that each possibility must carry its component of human limitation and error, that literature expressing each possibility will therefore carry that component of limitation and error, and that literary-historical judgment must not be so much concerned with exhibiting the limitation and error as with grasping the total possibility in its all-too-human manifold of style, form, and structure. Judgment will then not be absolutely sure, but it will strive to be in accord with all the facts. Downgrading will be contained within humanistic limits. To conceive of historical criticism thus is, of course, to run the danger of losing oneself in one's materials. But the only alternative to such a risk is, implicitly or explicitly, to declare oneself above them. And this, I feel, is what in the end Mr. Winters does. He cannot carry us into the works he studies, however well he may indicate how and why he does what he does, because he will not go deeply enough into history to see those works as all-too-humanly possible.

Friedrich Meinecke's essay, "Kausalitäten und Werte in der Geschichte" (recently put into English in Fritz Stern's admirable Meridian paperback, *The Varieties of History*), ends with these words:

Individuum est ineffabile. On this very fact depends the infinite fascination of the historical world, which secretly, yet openly, is constantly creating new spiritual entities and yet does not arrange them in a progression of ascending rank. For every epoch, said Ranke, is immediate to God.

We close with the words that followed on this sentence for, taken precisely, they state all that we have sought to establish in our battle against an opinion widespread in our profession. "Its value lies not at all in what comes forth from it, but in its own existence, in its authentic self."

Some such idea as this—its true, much maligned, and much misunderstood name is *historicism*—is basic to the theory of the first four books in this loosely tied parcel. Mr. Winters too is aware, hypersensitively aware, of the idea, knows that it is (as it is) "Romantic," sees that it leads to some sort of humbling (he might well say "humiliating") relativism, and therefore endeavors to avoid even the least commitment in its direction. Yet he would be, among other things, an historical critic; and I can only conclude that he fails in this one endeavor, at least, because he cannot take history seriously—which is to say, will not bring himself to conceive of history historically. The great strength of his explications and judgments, and thus their possible vulnerability too, is to be accounted for, in significant part, by the purity and strength of his anti-historicism. Among us, in our time, the test of historical criticism is, I should say, precisely the strength of its component of what I venture to call critical historicism; and, in our time, a major test of the strength of critical historicism is the power, authenticity, and integrity of its practitioner's creative understanding of Romanticism. Each of the first four books I have noticed above works, with varying success, toward this understanding. Mr. Winters long ago decided that, since the period was almost worthless, the understanding was too. His present work reflects that decision, and reflecting it, also recalls it. He would teach us how to read poems, so that we can get out from under the burden of their history. The others would, at their best, teach us how to read history and to bear its burden, so that we can know and judge ourselves in our reading. I cannot help but think that theirs is a more valid way than his, even though it is not as sure, as clear, and as direct.

LOUIS SIMPSON

Poets In Isolation¹

WHAT OUR POETS NEED is a critic. Though we've been told often enough that this is an age of criticism, the critics are mostly concerned with the dead. We need a critic of verse as it is written, a man like Sainte-Beuve who has followed living authors from their beginnings, who understands their aims and feels that their struggle is also his struggle, that his task is not only to explain the poet to the public, but also to influence his work, to correct him when he requires correction and to praise him when he requires praise—that is, while he is still alive.

In the absence of critics, we have reviewers, who are too often poets themselves and therefore disabled from giving acceptable advice. But if poets do not review other poets, who will? In the *Republic*, the just man is persuaded to govern by no other consideration than that if he does not, he himself will be governed by the unjust. The excuse for a poet's reviewing the work of his contemporaries is, similarly, that unless he does, the reviewing will be done by ignoramuses.

In the absence of criticism, our poets work in isolation. When the first barrier is passed and the reviews are favorable, the poet passes beyond criticism and also, unfortunately, beyond editing. For if there are no critics really engaged with verse as a living art, there is also a dearth of editors who are qualified to judge and winnow out a book of poems. If a poet has achieved a certain reputation, the hack reviewers will praise him vaguely, and his publishers will let him have *carte blanche*, until his reputation is no longer viable—to use a word dear to publishing business. And so, as with American novelists, we have many poets of the First Book, writers of promise, who then publish too often or not at all, who sink into mediocrity or cultivate their eccentricities—and all for the want of criticism.

It seems that Richard Eberhart is unable to criticize his own writing, and apparently there has been no editor to criticize it for him. Nor, one can be certain, will the reviewers of the *Times* or *Tribune* go out on a limb and say that a good deal of *Great Praises* is dreary metaphysics and slovenly writing. On reading the following lines, had I not known that the author was Eberhart, I would have thought it impossible for him ever to write poetry at all:

*Having fed impalpably on the ineluctable
In yearlong passion of the unfathomed
To realign the mystery of the ineffable . . .*

¹GREAT PRAISES, by Richard Eberhart. Oxford University Press. \$4.00. THE GREEN WALL, by James Wright. Yale University Press. \$2.50. A SWIMMER IN THE AIR: POEMS, by Howard Moss. Scribner's. \$3.00. LETTER FROM A DISTANT LAND, by Philip Booth. Viking. \$3.00. A CASE OF SAMPLES: POEMS 1946-1956, by Kingsley Amis. Harcourt, Brace. \$3.50.

Nor is this the only example. Here is another, found without much searching:

*They fear their death because they do not understand it.
They fear insecurity, which lacks philosophy,
Presuming that so timid a creature could be safe.
And they fear injustice, a lack of reality.*

On the other hand, Eberhart is capable of writing as well as this:

UR BURIAL

*Reach me a blue pencil of the moon,
The double-reined rings from tombs of Ur,
The lyre, the javelins from Sumer,
'The Ram caught in a thicket.'*

*A gold dagger, a golden toilet case,
The gold helmet of Meskalam-dug;
Rein-ring and mascot from
Queen Shub-ad's chariot.*

*I will drink a narcotic rich and dark,
I will lie down by my master in his sarcophagus,
All our company will join in sleep
To serve the sun in a life beyond sleep.*

The main virtue of Eberhart's work seems to be integrity. Like Hardy he shapes rough masses, he bears down like an ice-cap upon ideas. However, Hardy is rough in spite of himself; his poems seem incomplete or unpleasing because he is dealing with difficult materials; in short, he sometimes fails. But, in reading Eberhart, I cannot help feeling that his awkwardnesses are cultivated. He is not ingenuous. Knowing that grandeur is enough, he presents large ideas; but he does not try to complete them. The result is often merely an exercise in speculation. And all the incidental delights of language which, as Coleridge pointed out, are of the nature of poetry, have been lost. Poems such as "Independence and Resolution" and "The Hand and the Shadow," though they may have given pleasure in the writing, do not yield much pleasure to the reader.

Where he is not intellectually ambitious, Eberhart can astonish us with a real grandeur of images, as in "My Golden and My Fierce Assays" and "Salem." I would not exchange these lyrics for any number of polished lines such as the quarterly poet supplies.

James Wright's *The Green Wall* helps to lift the Yale Series of Younger Poets from the abyss into which, under the capricious editing of W. H. Auden, it has recently fallen. Whatever Auden's predilections, it would have been hard for him to overlook the real merits of this book. Wright says that he has tried to write like Frost and Robinson. It hasn't done him any harm, for Frost and Robinson worked in traditions of style which

are as permanent as English. Where the echo of his masters is strong, as in this third stanza of "A Girl in a Window," I find it pleasing. There is something to be said for a good imitation of that which is good in itself:

*Soon we must leave her scene to night,
To stars or the indiscriminate
Pale accidents of lantern light,
A watchman walking by too late.
Let us return her now, my friends,
Her love, her body to the grave
Fancy of dreams where love depends.
She gave, and did not know she gave.*

Wright has learned his craft; he knows what can be done with a particular subject-matter, within a particular scene or mood. He does not yearn for cosmic stature. If there is a fault in his work, it springs from delicacy; a few of the poems seem to say not very much about anything. But the successes are many. There is "On the Skeleton of a Hound":

*The earth knows how to handle the great dead
Who lived the body out, and broke its laws,
Knocked down a fence, tore up a field of clover.*

"Lament for My Brother on a Hayrake" and "To a Defeated Saviour" also deal with themes of death. The fourth section of *The Green Wall*, titled "Stories and Voices", presents characters who speak for themselves in dramatic situations. Here Wright uses, from time to time, an irregular line of considerable strength and point. The music he likes so well is put aside for larger considerations—the veracity of the poem as a whole, the carrying power of the action.

Of all the poems in this excellent first book, I prefer "The Assignment." The ghost of a girl revisits the scene of her love:

*I hid in bushes, shy. Already cars
Shuttled away, the earliest evening stars
Blurred in a cloud. A lone child left his shoes
Half in the sand, and slept beneath the stars.*

The living man who promised to remember her is not there; in his stead she entertains a demon. The poem ends:

*You sat beside the bed, you took my hands;
And when I lay beyond all speech, you said,
You swore to love me after I was dead,
To meet me in a grave and love me still,
Love the white air, the shadows where it lay.
Dear love, I called your name in air today,
I saw the picnic vanish down the hill,
And waved the moon awake, with empty hands.*

A young poet who can write like this may justifiably hope to write as well as Frost or Robinson. James Wright's work contains powerful reserves of pity and affection.

One day when a man was talking about modern poetry on TV, my set went on the blink. But I'll bet that after saying that modern poetry is obscure, he remarked that poets nowadays don't write like Keats. Nevertheless, in reading Howard Moss, whose third book, *A Swimmer in the Air*, graces Scribner's list, I was reminded of Keats. It was the crickets did it:

*Intrinsic as the crickets are to night,
The summer night is music made by them.
Uncritical, we listen to their themes.
The little orchestras that lure the stars
Down, down from fiery perimeters
Until we seem to touch them with our hands,
Have chirped into a silence. Where are they
Who plucked the hours of our sleep away?*

I do not think that Moss suffers, in this instance, from the comparison. The poem, "A Summer Gone," continues with no discernible loss:

*Is it love that makes our summers shine?
Ideas of love, I mean. The naked limbs:
Bronze gears that cut the bluest sky to shreds
By running past reclining, sandy heads?
Sweet breasts that hold the very heart of love?
All shapely weights that we are mad to love?
Those beautiful outsides, those thin-skinned maps
Are part of love. Or all of it, perhaps.*

Howard Moss, like others of his generation—William Meredith, for example—bases his style upon the values of civilized conversation. Where something extra is required, he advances into intimacy; he does not rise, or sink, into rhetoric. This style can do nearly everything. It admits the modern scene with its ignoble nouns; it admits humor and irony. Excluded are the grand effects—a considerable loss. But then, only pedantry asks a poet to write like someone else. Within his limits, which are consciously chosen, Howard Moss achieves nearly perfect poems which describe a recognizable world—the world we live in, rather than a world we wish we lived in.

Unfortunately, *A Swimmer in the Air* is marred by the inclusion of light verse that should have been put aside for separate publication. "Horror Movie," with its approval of Dr. Unlikely, Dracula, the Leopard Man and other chimeræ, is amusing enough, but it disrupts the book. The "Modified Sonnets" are not so amusing; mere parodies, they disrupt the book further. Perhaps the intention was to lighten the volume or give it variety—if so, it was an error.

Philip Booth's *Letter from a Distant Land* is the Lamont Poetry Selection for 1956. To point to the range of subject-matter and form in this poet's work is not to distinguish him particularly, for each of the poets under consideration in this review works in various materials; indeed, the lyric poet in our time who exploited one technique or subject would be an anomaly. Booth's form, however, seems to be pressured by his subject; his variety is not a strategy of showing what he can do, but the result of what he has been compelled to do. Each poem has a naked shape. He often works in short lines and brief stanzas; he does not cling to the skirts of the pentameter.

Another mark of Booth's poetry is its concreteness. He is, in this respect, at an opposite extreme from Eberhart. The danger of the concrete is superficiality, but whereas superficiality may please, pomposity cannot. In our time, when we are too conscious of major reputations—Eliot and Yeats—for a poet to record simply what he has seen for himself takes a certain courage. Much of Booth's work is descriptive; meadow, orchard, marsh-land and sea, the Maine bays, provide occasions for poetry:

*The sky is halo-
hazed, barn and silo
smell of baled hay,
corn-crib, and dry
harvest days . . .*

Frequently his landscapes and seascapes are electrified, as at the end of "Heron":

*Then in the rising rush
of those great wings, far on
I saw the herrings flash

and drop. And the dash
of lesser wings in the barren
marsh flew through my flesh.*

The title poem, "Letter from a Distant Land," a monologue rendering the poet's life and his thoughts about it, shows that Booth is capable of extended effort in that most attractive, and most difficult medium, blank verse. The temptation in writing unrhymed pentameters is to pad; the pressure that shapes a poem flags, and words are placed in no necessary order. What saves and elevates the medium is an overall respect for truth; the need to get the subject down. There isn't a lie, or even a half-lie, in this "Letter", as far as I can tell; the lines move with conviction and colloquial ease.

Sometimes, in order to give his poems more weight, Booth tries to twist them toward an affirmation they do not really have. In the poems "This Land", "Instruction in the Art," and "Raker," the word *braise* is used to suggest force which, I suspect, the poet feels the work itself has not generated. (Like *ceremony* and *dance*, *praise* should be forbidden to poets in this generation.)

Author of the novels *Lucky Jim* and *That Uncertain Feeling*, a light of The Movement, Kingsley Amis published verse before he published the novels that brought him fame. I won't bet that he'll continue writing verse, for the novel seems better suited to his comic talents.

The poem "Against Romanticism", in his *A Case of Samples: Poems 1946-1956*, fairly explains Amis' position. It is, after all, the old quarrel we have with Romanticism: it is disordered, inaccurate, unsatisfactory. But I have heard the argument put more convincingly than this:

*Let us make at least visions that we need:
Let mine be pallid, so that it cannot
Force a single glance, form a single word;
An afternoon long-drawn and silent, with
Buildings free from all grime of history . . .*

The anti-Romantic vision too often sounds like a holiday at the East Peebles Latin Grammar School. The trouble with Amis' verse, as with so much verse nowadays, is that while it is in good taste, intelligent, humorous, sensitive, et cetera, it lacks the right kind of disorder. Intelligence can be dull. A little of the conviction held by Socrates and by Coleridge and his peers, that poetry is a kind of insanity, wouldn't harm our boys at all. Of course, the Romantics wrote a lot of windy stuff, but they also wrote the "Ancient Mariner," "The Ode on a Grecian Urn," and "The Triumph of Life." I'm afraid that with our virtues of good taste we throw out the Mariner as well as the Idiot Boy.

I have heard that Amis can hold a pub entranced with his rendition of the sound-track of a movie about outer space. Perhaps the most entertaining poem in his sample-case, "A Dream of Fair Women," is fun of the same kind—inspired pub humor. The dreamer knows that he is not Don Juan nor was meant to be, though:

*Feigning aplomb, perhaps for half an hour,
I hover, and am shown by each princess
The entrance to her tower;
Open, in that its tenant throws the key
At once to anyone, but not unless
The anyone is me.*

Many of his poems are delightful only because they are so well done; "A Note on Wyatt", for example, depends on the perfecting of a metaphor—a woman is a ship:

*Now, jolly ship, sign on a jolly crew:
God bless you, dear, and all who sail in you.*

On his ground Amis is unbeatable, and he never leaves that ground; in fact, I doubt there's a bad line in his book. How many bad lines, stanzas, poems, are there in the *Lyrical Ballads*?

Last, I wish to add my voice to the chorus of praise of the new Californian school of poets, located in Los Angeles. I am astonished that William Carlos Williams, *Mademoiselle* magazine, and Mr. Breit of the *Times*, have not yet discovered this youthful group of young poets (not one of them is a day over thirty-five). It is true they have not written much poetry as yet, and most of what they have written is unreadable, but they have the right attitudes; they look like poets. And their solitary, supreme masterpiece, "Squeal", cannot be criticized. It has to be heard:

SQUEAL

*I saw the best minds of my generation
 Destroyed—Marvin
 Who spat out poems; Potrzebie
 Who coagulated a new bop literature in fifteen
 Novels; Alvin
 Who in his as yet unwritten autobiography
 Gave Brooklyn an original lex loci.
 They came from all over, from the pool-room,
 The bargain basement, the rod,
 From Whitman, from Parkersburg, from Rimbaud
 New Mexico, but mostly
 They came from colleges, ejected
 For drawing obscene diagrams of the Future.
 They came here to L. A.,
 Flexing their members, growing hair,
 Planning immense unlimited poems,
 More novels, more poems, more autobiographies.*

*It's love I'm talking about, you dirty bastards!
 Love in the bushes, love in the freight-car!
 I saw them fornicating and being fornicated,
 Saying to Hell with you!*

*America.
 America is full of Babbitts.
 America is run by money.*

*What was it Walt said? Go West!
 But the important thing is the return ticket.
 The road to publicity runs by Monterey.
 I saw the best minds of my generation
 Reading their poems to Vassar girls,
 Being interviewed by Mademoiselle.
 Having their publicity handled by professionals.
 When can I go into an editorial office
 And have my stuff published because I'm weird?
 I could go on writing like this forever . . .*

BENJAMIN DE MOTT

Two Liberals, One Aesthete¹

MARCEL AYMÉ ONCE WROTE a series of monologues in which an old aristocrat tries to persuade a young writer to say in print that literature has lost its bearings, has been steadily drifting away from life for almost a century—or since Baudelaire—and ought to set a new course. The writer listens and considers but in the end declines the invitation, saying evasively, “Monsieur, I should be banned from every literary circle in France.” Toward the end of *The Mirror in the Roadway*, the spikiest general treatise on the novel that I have read, and the most entertaining, Frank O'Connor pauses to comment on these monologues. He describes them as “a typical French argument with a typical French conclusion, which suggests that the author will do nothing in particular.” The condescension is not surprising. Back of it stands a scrappy Irishman whose own response to the charge that literature is drifting has been to write an entire book in its support, every sentence of which is as forthright (and as homely) as a hot wood stove.

We know perfectly what to expect in such a book, schooled as we were and are by Lucemen, Brooks, DeVoto, the old *Saturday Review* or the old Donald Adams. Obscurity vs. clarity, popular literature vs. coterie entertainment, joy in life vs. depression, *The Hudson Review* vs. *The Saturday Evening Post*—cant, shibboleths, Trofimovitchism, and an intellectual atmosphere comparable to that of a real estate office in Peekskill. But although O'Connor is a high-minded man, and as devoted as Graves is to his mission as debunker, he avails himself of none of the stupid categories cited. He has no dead Catholic theologians to flay as fascist plotters against the common reader, and he hints at no base editorial conspiracies; he means to be just to the writers who were involved in some way in the drift, and repeatedly allows that they may have brought us closer to the deepest facts of our experience than the writers he himself prefers; he knows that before a return to the ideals of the classical novel can be contemplated, some respectable intellectual grounds for it must be found. Moreover, in defining the kinds of truth that the novel offered before and after the drift began, he uses a set of familiar literary terms with enough consistency to enable us to arrive at a fresh sense of what can and cannot be done with them.

His argument runs as follows. The true novel, the real thing, is marked by the rigor of its moral judgment and the fullness of its absorption in the common feelings of common life. It begins with Jane Austen and Stendhal, artists who rarely forgot that the world did not equal merely the sum of their desires. Maintaining this awareness cost both a great

¹POLITICS AND THE NOVEL, by *Irving Howe*. Horizon Press. \$3.50. THE MIRROR IN THE ROADWAY, by *Frank O'Connor*. Knopf. \$4.50

price—much more than could be paid by the first generation of genius (Balzac, Dickens, Gogol, and Thackeray) that succeeded them. In the work of these new men, the mirror in the roadway, as Stendhal called the novel, became a distorting mirror: the writer turned away “from ideals of personal conduct to great public issues; and from the passionate quest for objective truth to a sort of mass hallucination.” He was able to handle unprecedented masses of materials and developed a wholly new power of creating an epoch from the inside; in his hands the novel gained tremendously in sensual impact. But he was much weaker as a moralist, and showed other failings in the bargain. He inflated character with local color so that voices became symbolic of cities and plains. He let his will go its way, smothering the contradictory elements of personality that must emerge if characterization is not to degenerate into caricature. He indulged in theatricality and in pseudo-scientific generalization, became obsessed with nation and race and history, turned again and again to the matter of the fairy tale. Indeed, he brought back into literature, thereby swinging his form to “another pole,” the whole mass of romantic material that Jane Austen and Stendhal had excluded—the Gothick castle, the hermitage, the ruined abbey and the like. The latter were marvelously disguised as “lawyers, bankers, or officials” by the realistic background, but the transformation was not really complete—the old claptrap of diabolism was still visible underneath. What issued was neither “romance nor realism, but the realistic novel using romance as a source of energy,” and sometimes breaking down into fantasy.

As a consequence of this movement away from the center, when writers appeared who valued the achievement of the older novel and wished to turn back to it, they could not recover the original purity. Turgenev, Tolstoy, Flaubert, and Trollope strained after “impartiality and integral truth,” as Turgenev described the goal, but each suffered under a special handicap. Turgenev’s inexplicable tendency to translate personal problems into political ones hampered serious objective study of character. Tolstoy exalted feeling and thought of morality as a natural possession of anonymous men, the peasant mass, rather than as an achievement of individual judgment. Trollope was “passive” in the face of life. Flaubert, pulled by the naturalist’s desire to abdicate from any position of judgment, set all experience in an antithetical mold and turned away without comment.

These were men of genius, of course, and at least two later writers—Chekhov and the Lawrence of the first half of *Sons and Lovers* (“absolutely, the opening half is the greatest thing in English fiction,” an estimate which, if there were only a shade less solemnity in the chapters mentioned, the reviewer would accept) march with them in the line of greatness that comes down from Miss Austen. Yet each pointed in the direction of the later novel—away from common life, that is, away from objectivity and judgment. And the majority of the immediate successors did much more than point. Dostoevsky, for example, represents the crippling of

realism by fantasy. Though rich in imaginative quality, possibly closer to the truth than any earlier novelist, the creator of Stavrogin imposes the false logical structure of neurosis on experience and violates the whole subject-object relationship. James offers only an illusion of "real people in real situations;" when we look close we see that his books are "held together, as a Kafka allegory is, not by any process of comparison with external models, but by some sort of interior logic, by the internal relations of characters and incidents." And Hardy—Hardy is a poet, a symbolist, a man with general ideas, "not a novelist with an exterior world that he tries to assimilate to an inner one."

The mold of the modern novel was not finally cast, though, until Freud took people behind the mirror to reveal how the history of the subconscious argues against the notion of free will. This revelation lent the prestige of science to the recrudescence of the romantic revival that already had stirred interest in the esoteric, in magic, dreams and "dream images (symbols)," and it sufficed to kill off the "objective and analytic tradition of European prose." Of the great names of the Freudian era (Proust, Joyce, Gide, Lawrence, Forster, Mann, and Woolf), at least four do not write novels at all. In their work the temporal objective conception of character disappears; subject and object change places arbitrarily; the theme becomes, as in Proust, the unknowability of character, the failure of all knowledge. We end in a world whose wholly dream-like structure depends on an unconscious, irrational accumulation of images: once a clear and substantial figure in the common path, man is now, like H.C.E., "a metaphor in the mind of God."

What I like about all this is the arguer's cockiness, his refusal to recognize what he is up against, and his tartness ("The truth is that that particular theory of literature [naturalism] originated in a painter's studio, for it has the marks of painters' illiteracy, an occupational disease too rarely fatal.") Most critics contrive to hide their argument when they know that a really extraordinary beast, a Dickens or a Dostoevsky, is about to thump down the runway into the cage; O'Connor never wavers. For as long as half a chapter he keeps himself in one belligerent piece, barking on at the noble spirits that ring him round—and when the time of reckoning comes, it redounds, oddly, to his credit. For it comes, of course, as a quotation: at the sound of any of these voices, critic and argument vanish like the tamer in some cartoon, the lion of the moment leaving at most an indigestible cap and pistol or so behind on the straw. But only, we think, only because the critic quotes so well. The fact is that O'Connor's taste is excellent. Reading him we are always aware that to convince us the troupe is manageable he has to avoid mention of its inferiors. (Dickens a fantast? There is a witty and well-wrought essay by G. Armour Craig in the latest English Institute volume² that surely would make anyone tread slowly here: it does its work by comparing the fantasy of *Bleak House* with the fantasy of *Jane*

²SOCIETY AND SELF IN THE NOVEL, edited by Mark Schorer. Columbia University Press. \$3.00.

Eyre.) And we know that his *brio* is bound to produce some howlers—Trollope set up as the equal of Tolstoy, Joyce made out to be a writer bereft of observation. Even at such moments, though, the critic somehow manages to be winning: he has a keen eye for the passage that shows us the writer at the summit of his powers, and his description of the achievement, if we forget the sentence of final assessment, is invariably satisfying. Few people have written better about Hardy, Gogol, or Chekhov, no one has set the limits of the gods as forcefully, as O'Connor has done; and if he is too confident of the virtues of his point of view, at least he pulls up short of the assertion that *The Charterhouse of Parma* is a masterpiece or that *Sons and Lovers* is less than that.

But he has one fault that comes within a whisker of disabling him completely: he knows no history. It is all very well, possibly even engaging, to describe oneself, as O'Connor does, as "not only a nineteenth century realist but also a nineteenth century liberal." But it takes ignorance or deceit to believe that that label plus an occasional wink can justify pious talk about subjects and objects and "our unspoiled moral sense," about the wickedness of "mechanistic determinism" or of these sly idealistic philosophies that keep springing up for no reason. At one point O'Connor undertakes to reestablish the dignity of the "merchant code"—as if such a code still existed even as a metaphor in the mind of Bruce Barton. At another, speaking commonplaces about the atomic bomb, he says, "Humanity has faced crises before now, and the middle class has a high standard of adaptability, and it may be that it can create a new age of relative peace and order"—as if a middle class existed any more even in a Sociology textbook. Elsewhere, quoting Aym   again, he notes that when the Allied troops burst into Belsen and Buchenwald, they saw a poem by Baudelaire, and then adds: "If, as I think, the work of this whole period has become history, it is because, after Belsen and Buchenwald, the romantic novelist has nowhere else to go. The future is with the Aristotelians." In order to credit the prediction we have to believe that Belsen and Buchenwald are dream images (symbols) that stand for nothing in the way of historical development. A painful belief—perhaps something to be thrown off lightly with all the other instances of Irish obliviousness, or viewed merely as a consequence of a short story writer's readiness to stop at the top of the iceberg. But no, O'Connor's sins in this kind are too many to be forgotten. He may not really mean that the only new element in civilization between 1820 and 1920 was the *Interpretation of Dreams*, but he virtually says that out loud. And such a conclusion plays the devil with his own sunny description of himself: at his very worst the nineteenth century liberal was never as much of an aesthete as the Harvard lecturer from Cork.

The alternative to aestheticism that is currently being offered is Irving Howe's new book, which has in mind from beginning to end the non-literary elements of nineteenth and twentieth century life that have driven the novelist into his present situation. Howe does not of course

focus on symbolists and other drifters. Like O'Connor he takes account of "the vast respect which the great novelist is ready to offer the whole idea of *opposition*, the opposition he needs to allow for in his book against his own predispositions and yearnings and fantasies." The great writer affirms the autonomy of the imagination, but "even as he makes the most severe claims for his power of imposing his will upon the unformed materials his imagination has brought up to him, he yet acknowledges that he must pit himself against the imperious presence of the necessary." But Howe believes that the "necessary" for at least some writers has not been only the common feelings of common life; over the past century and a half "it is politics above all, politics as both temptation and impediment, that represents the necessary."

The line of argument is brought into the open in a discussion of *The Charterhouse*, a work in which the critic finds prophetic awareness of the tensions that are to come into the relation between society (and government) and the gifted individual. Mosca is just not a prisoner of his public self; Fabrizio is an "extreme case of self-alienation . . . divorced from his own activity as if he were assuming a series of roles from which his inner self is quite detached." Both lives testify to the encroachment of political experience—politics appearing here as a monster of public cant—on private experience; they are controlled by negative elements—disbelief in the validity of personal relationships, a sense of the intelligent man's dependence on ruse for survival in the public world. The latter give rise to behavior that can only be described as "forced by politics." No doubt the endless court finagling *is* farce, but "these marvelously intelligent people" (the great Duchess is included) feel obliged to behave as if it should be taken seriously, and this is the key to the tragic meaning of the book.

It is also the key to the meaning of a period, as are many of the uncertainties, deceptions, and perilous balances that Howe uncovers in later chapters. His book is organized as a series of separate studies of major figures—Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Conrad, Turgenev, James—followed by sections on some nineteenth century Americans (Hawthorne, Henry Adams, and James again) and on a group of recent novelists; but at no point do we lose sight of the critic's assumption that history matters. The exhaustion of the energies of liberalism after the French Revolution and the disillusionment that followed 1848 are hardly the same thing, we are told; part of the difference is registered in the difference between Stendhal and Turgenev. Conversely, James and Conrad are more penetrating analysts of character than Silone, Malraux, and Koestler not only because they had greater gifts, but because they were located in positions of "isolated social comfort" and worked within "a still vital cultural tradition," while the latter had to enter their tragedies and explore new regions of mass consciousness and revolt. The "pure" critic, in short, can say many good things about Stendhal or about Orwell, but to understand either he needs to trace in some detail the movement from the bourgeois monarchy of Louis Philippe with its debasing med-

iocritry, its narrowing of the free areas of the judging individual intelligence, to our own world, in which politics has virtually displaced humanity.

The difference between this approach and O'Connor's is obvious, but even so it is worth contemplating at close hand. Consider the case of Turgenev. O'Connor found a political superstructure in his novels that "has little or nothing to do with the substructure and consists largely of rationalizations and symbols." Usually the substructure is a conflict between instinct and judgment of the kind favored by Jane Austen and Stendhal. "But in the superstructure this conflict is being transformed into one between old Russia with its witchcraft and brutality, and the new Russia, which Turgenev anticipated rather than saw. . . . The real problems of Russia are being ignored in favor of the imaginary problems of Turgenev, while the real problems of Turgenev are distorted into the imaginary problems of Russia." What are the causes of this distortion? Turgenev had an "arbitrary despondent attitude like Thackeray's," and was gullible enough to think of himself as a politico, after *A Sportman's Sketches* were credited with influencing opinion in the emancipation of the serfs.

Howe's explanation is more complicated. He sees Turgenev's habit of translating personal experience into political terms as a stage in the harsh progress toward the mass state. He reminds his reader that Lenin described Turgenev's moment in history as one when "the revolutionary spirit of bourgeois democracy was already dying but the revolutionary spirit of the socialist proletariat was not yet born." To be a liberal in the Russia of that day, or to have even the most ordinary feeling for others, was "to have thoughts full of revolutionary implications." But only thoughts: the failure of the last purely democratic revolutions led to debilitating paradoxes—something needs to be done, nothing can be done, perhaps nothing should be done. As a man aware of the atmosphere of post-revolutionary lassitude, caught in these thickening paradoxes, Turgenev could not give himself wholly either to public or private concerns. His idylls are "violated by politics" only in the sense that their themes, homesickness and alienation, are analogues for his political feelings. And violated or not, they ought to be valued highly for their expression of a moment in history that is not altogether unlike our own.

Plainly this explanation of the novelist's abrupt changes of tone and impurity is more persuasive than O'Connor's—to expand the praise, Howe's book as a whole is one of the best explanatory accounts of the dehumanization of the novel that we have had. Beside it O'Connor's gabbling about recrudescences of romanticism and arbitrary despondence sounds like the Survey of World Literature at old X State U. (I hear a silver-haired lecturer saying, "Ivan S. Turgenev," cough, "born 1818, son of a cavalry," cough, "colonel, was a most unhappy," cough, "man.") But it is a pity that Howe feels compelled to celebrate the impurity that he explains. I do not imply that he is less than a thoroughly literary

person: his taste shows in an appreciation of Silone and in his observations on Malraux, Koestler, and Orwell, and elsewhere he displays his talent for entering into the peculiar nature of the writer he faces—most remarkably in the chapter on Conrad. My complaint is only that he is too eager to trade a good scene for a prophecy. His enthusiasm for his subjects leads him often to political and historical exegesis which, however helpful in showing forth a succession of novelists as prophets of estrangement and alienation, is not dependable as a guide to the primary quality of the experience that the book in question offers—at least to those whose political commitments, probably for the worse, lack the intensity of his own. His approval of the endings of *Rudin* and *Fathers and Sons* stems from his sense of what these endings reveal of the novelist's politics; but on any less specialized view the endings will continue to seem mistakes as obvious as missed cues among the oboes. He sees as one pinnacle of Turgenev's art the chapter about Fomushka and Fimushka in *Virgin Soil* which O'Connor regards as an embarrassing bit of caricature, and O'Connor is right. The latter, as I said, is able to redeem his argument by quoting a forgotten scene and naming its qualities with great delicacy; Howe has some of this power, as his brief excursion on Silone's *Fontamara* demonstrates, but he seems to feel that it is not to his present purpose to use it, and he praises several books that can be savored only by one who is himself a prophet.

No one needs to be told, though, that the historical critic and the aesthetic critic see things differently; the necessary observation is that, in the present instance, the historical critic wrongly limited himself and the aesthetic critic wrongly overextended himself. Both have an achievement to their credit: a general book about the novel that is tendentious enough to be continuously interesting, and a few chapters on individual writers (Howe is best on the twentieth century writers he treats) that are as good as anything yet written on their subjects. Reading the books together one has an intuition of the kind of novel that remains to be written: namely, a tale that will dramatize the collision of domestic life with some non-political abstraction, the latter to serve simultaneously as an analogue for the not yet wholly accomplished engulfment of the personal, and as a fact, a detail of common life. The proper praise of these critics is that both give the impression that when this improbable contraption appears, if it ever does, they will be the first to recognize and appreciate it. Believers (on grounds of different merit) in the future of the form they analyze, they still ask of books, even books written last year, that they speak of the world we know, and not merely of the world of the private fantasy. At a time when the usual critical procedure is to throw out a suggestion in favor of more derangement and more symbols, this disposition of mind seems original, and ought to attract every post-political citizen who is, in his secret soul and in contempt of history, bored with hell.

GERALD WEALES

Give Me a Tune I Can Whistle

THIS COLLECTION of essays¹ attempts to see every face of its titular subject, which is also called, with varying degrees of enthusiasm or scorn, the popular arts, the public arts and—the favorite among the antis—*kitsch*. The two editors represent the two prevailing attitudes toward mass culture. Bernard Rosenberg is the Jeremiah (“There can be no doubt that the mass media present a major threat to man’s autonomy”); David Manning White is the Pollyanna (he takes comfort in the fact that bear-baiting has fallen out of favor). The viewers with alarm insist that television, the movies, the mass-circulation magazines are consistently and terrifyingly milking the ordinary man of his individuality and his critical perception, turning him into a cipher, a rubber stamp that is indistinguishable from its neighbor. The more sanguine critics prefer to view the same media as potential art forms, capable of lifting the same ordinary man (apparently still a cipher) into an appreciation of the higher things in life. If I had to take sides, I would prefer to join White, Gilbert Seldes and the starry-eyed advocates for the defense. Yet there are so many products of the mass media that make my flesh crawl—for instance, a fourteen-year-old boy on television whining the slightly obscene popular song *Young Love*, or the pamphlet *Dwight D. Eisenhower’s Favorite Poetry, Prose and Prayers*, issued absolutely free with every copy of the *May Good Housekeeping*—that I find myself drawn to Rosenberg, Dwight Macdonald and the despairers. There is, however, no point in taking sides, since the sides are the opposite ones of the same coin. Although the unhappy observers admit that there are good things in mass culture and the happy ones admit that there is much that is reprehensible, both groups operate by generalizations and, in doing so, they sidestep the approach to the popular arts that seems to me most valid—the critical one, the simple attempt to define a work as good or bad on its own terms.

Except for the purpose of definition, the contrast between high and low culture, between fine and popular arts is a misleading one. Even as definition, it is suspect because popular genres—the novel, for instance—have a way of working up to “fine” status. The use of *high* and *low* by the observers of mass culture, particularly by its detractors, is not intended to be definitional. The adjectives are loaded before the discussion begins. High culture is desirable; low culture is not. By implication—although none of the users of the high-low terminology would go so far—a bad concerto is more desirable than a good pop tune. The result is a kind of criticism by association which is even more apparent when the division is between the fine and the popular. The fine is designed to please the aesthetic tastes of a small and discriminating group; the popular is aimed at a big return, a mass audience, a huge circulation. The fine is

¹MASS CULTURE, edited by Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White. The Free Press and The Falcon’s Wing Press. \$6.50.

quality; the popular is quantity. Under this kind of thinking, a story in the *Ladies' Home Journal* is automatically bad and one in *The Hudson Review* is automatically good. A novel that reaches the best-seller list becomes suspect and a play that runs long enough to pay off its backers loses any artistic qualities that it possesses. Tennessee Williams is a case in point. His limitations as a playwright become more and more apparent with each play, but a large part of the criticism aimed at him by intellectuals stems from the fact that his plays make money. The suspicion is that he has found a profitable dramatic line and is hewing to it as long as it pays at the box-office; a more useful—and probably more accurate—criticism would concern itself with the obvious fact that Williams has very little to say and a crying need to say it over and over.

I do not mean to imply that there is no such thing as formula writing, or that the ordinary products of Hollywood, of television and of the mass-circulation magazines do not follow a tiresomely repetitive pattern. If popular culture were no more than this collection of formulae and patterns, it would be simply a matter for sociologists and anthropologists. The critics could forget about it. Yet when critics begin talking in terms of highbrow, middlebrow, lowbrow—in some of his recent essays Richard Chase uses Russell Lynes' vocabulary as if the words had qualitative significance—and when a man like Gunther Anders invents a whole mythology in which television is a plot against the mass man, it is time to cry a halt. It is time for *low* and *high*, for *fine* and *popular* to be pastured to make way for *good* and *bad*. There are good and bad movies, good and bad television shows, good and bad low comedians (the *low* means something here), good and bad popular songs and good and bad comic strips; and the distinction is an aesthetic one. The wholesale attack on popular culture or its enthusiastic defense is pointless. Those who think that the world is going to hell in a television handbasket are not going to stop the descent by clucking; the best service that they can render decaying culture is to look for and to praise loudly and determinedly anything worthwhile in the medium and to damn the bad not with the smug use of dirty words (low and *kitsch*) but by saying precisely what is wrong. Television's defenders might follow the same advice; the best defense is not to count the number of cultural shows on a particular Sunday afternoon, as White does in his essay, but to work for some critical standards that might conceivably be of value to television.

I almost wrote an article on children's literature last year for a magazine that I admire, but a genuine difference of opinion arose between me and the editor. I wanted to examine juvenile books as a whole—smiling at the good, scowling at the bad—but he wanted me to write about the state of children's literature as symptomatic of the cultural decline of our times. His approach would have forced me not only to damn my own book for children as part of a cultural decadence (about which I have doubts) but it would also have automatically ruled out the possibility of my praising the large amount of excellent illustration that one finds in children's books today and the imaginative work of authors like Ruth

Krauss, Margaret Wise Brown and Harry Behn, not to mention the adult fantasists, like Thurber, Bemelmans and E. B. White, who write for children. The idea of taking an entire genre or an entire popular medium and passing judgment on it is finally of little value. The healthier approach to popular culture is the one that recognizes that there is a qualitative difference between *Pal Joey* and *Bells Are Ringing*, between *Pogo* and *Ella Cinders*, between *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* and *Giant*. The only essay in the whole of *Mass Culture* that attempts to bring some aesthetic criteria to bear on a popular art is Edmund Wilson's "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" and its aim is really not to criticize the particular novels under consideration, but to damn the mystery story as a whole. I share Wilson's complete indifference to the detective story and I am quite willing to agree with him that even the best ones are often sloppily written. In so far as the admirers of Dorothy L. Sayers or Ngaio Marsh insist on their standing as novelists, Wilson's criticism is apt and just. There is a danger implicit in his essay, however, for it is too easy to criticize one genre in terms of another. The detective story is a novel of sorts and may be judged as one, but the critic of popular culture must beware of crossing lines in his judgments. A magazine illustration is not a painting, a popular song is not an oratorio and a television play is not a play for the theater. A work of popular art must be examined within the limitations imposed by its medium (often as artificial as the demands of a sestina) and in relation to the best that the medium is capable of achieving; then it can be damned or praised sensibly.

Having insisted that mass culture needs not universal praise or blame, but the kind of discriminating critical standards usually applied to the headier arts, I would now like to compound the heresy (cf. Henry Rabassiere's "For the newest fashion in mass culture is to scorn mass culture") by insisting on the pleasure that can be got from the bad in the popular arts. It is obvious that the men who uncover the sins of mass culture by studiously examining the movies, the comic strips, the television programs and the magazines that purvey pernicious ideas and attitudes do so because they get some sort of pleasure out of even the worst of these art forms. To spare them, however, I will wax autobiographical. I was sitting in my room quietly reading one of the essays in *Mass Culture* the other Sunday when I heard a pipe-and-drum corps somewhere down on the street playing "Give My Regards to Broadway." Without feeling in the least narcotized, as they say in the jargon, I put the book down, put on my shoes and went out to hunt the source of the music. I found a parade forming for St. George's Day (judging by size alone, the St. George's Day parade is high culture compared to the low of St. Patrick's) with not only the pipe-and-drum corps I had heard, but a bagpipe band as well. I stayed until the group had straggled up Broadway and then returned refreshed to *Mass Culture*. In much the same way, I was delighted to find in the collection of Eisenhower's favorites that so annoyed me as a phenomenon the dreadful poem, "Thanksgiving Day," by Lydia Maria Child, the one that begins:

*Over the river and through the wood,
To grandfather's house we go;
The horse knows the way
To carry the sleigh
Through the white and drifted snow.*

Finding it was a little like coming across a piece of my own childhood, but my pleasure never let me imagine that Miss Child had written a poem of genuine aesthetic value.

My fondness for band music and very bad poetry, like my attraction to murky spy movies, usually starring Peter Lorre and the late Sidney Greenstreet and set in far-away places like Aleppo, does not mean that my mind is one of the mythical mass receptacles into which mass culture is continuously pouring. What is more, I suspect that the mass receptacles do not exist either. The average television viewer or movie-goer probably does not articulate his critical opinions in the way that I do (since I am a semi-professional), but he is certainly not a yielding catch-all. I remember coming out of a theater in Atlanta after having seen the Renoir mistake, *The River*, in time to catch one young man warning another not to go in: "That's the damndest movie I ever saw." His remark was succinct; my criticism—had I written one—would have filled pages, but my conclusion would have been the same. On another occasion, a man stood up in a theater in one of the most saccharine moments of *Intermezzo* and made a gun of his fingers, like a kid playing cowboy, and went "tchk . . . tchk" at the screen. These are active manifestations, I suspect, of a passive resistance to being convinced, of an old American custom of not being taken in. It is not unlikely that ideas and attitudes, at least on a very superficial level (Elvis Presley's haircut; Marlon Brando's mannerisms), do affect audiences, but the agonizing reappraisals that are always underway in the advertising business indicate the extent to which the relationship between the product of the mass media and its supposedly receptive listener is in doubt.

Those who worry most about the effect of mass culture, not only doubt that the viewer or listener has the power to resist the blandishments of the media, they also ignore the obvious inattention with which the film or, even more, the television program is received. The assumption is that the ordinary listener concentrates as intently as does the horrified social critic. Actually, in most homes television is as ignored as it is omnipresent. While Arlene Francis is subtly invading the house of a morning, telling the housewife that a particular kind of curtain is good this year or that the Girl Scouts are a worthy organization, the viewer is out in the kitchen checking the roast for the night's dinner or taking the clothes out of the drier. As Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton put it in one of the essays in *Mass Culture*: "To know the number of hours people keep the radio turned on gives no indication of the effect upon them of what they hear." Leo Bogart in a study of the effect of comic strips on their readers (incredibly based on 121 interviews) decided that for the most part even the avid reader was decidedly casual about what happened to

Dick Tracy. If alarmists want something to worry about, this tendency to inattention would be better than the bugaboo about the mass media as opiates. The danger for the quality work at any cultural level is that the habit of casualness will fail to give it the attention that it demands and needs.

Mass Culture, as you can see, is a book that is likely to provoke the reader to his own thoughts on the subject. The collection does not, as my remarks might imply, consist solely of wide, general views of the popular arts. There are more detailed examinations of particular media, even of particular works, although in these, too, the emphasis is never on the quality of the work, but on the attitude of which it is representative. This kind of study can have validity of course, although its subject is society and not the art that it pretends to deal with. George Orwell, in the book's best essay of this type, discusses *Raffles* and *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*, not because he is interested in either book, but because he wants to comment on the changes in attitude toward the criminal and toward "fair-play" between 1900 and 1939. For the most part, such essays are by sociologists and are based on some kind of research. Bernard Berelson and Patricia J. Salter, for example, present the results of a study in which 198 short stories were examined by eight analysts (graduate students in sociology). The authors go to some length to define the various categories under which the characters in the stories were examined and the resulting information about attitudes toward majority and minority Americans in popular fiction seems quite solid. The results, however, are exactly what any observant reader would have found in a casual reading of the same kind of fiction. Orwell's approach, even though it produces no percentages, is more refreshing.

Besides the Orwell and Wilson articles and that of Lazarsfeld and Merton, which is rewarding despite the fact that it is written in that strange language that sociologists always use, the book contains a number of other very good essays. I particularly liked Robert Warshow's sensitive, personal comments on the comic book "menace"; Frederick Elkin's restrained examination of *The Next Voice You Hear*; and Henry Rabassiere's bang-up destruction of Gunther Anders' pompous "The Phantom World of TV." There are a few selections that are outrageously inept, like Alan Dutscher's attack on the book business in America, which is so bad-tempered and wrongheaded that he spoils the effect of the facts that he has gathered; he finally convinced me, by the logic of opposites, that all American publishers are really kindly, grey-haired, Dickensian old gentlemen who care only for culture and not one whit for money. Most of the essays are solid and careful and some are a little dull. If the book is meant to be as titillating as the Marboro Book Club's mass-culturish advertisement for it in the May 5 Sunday *Times* ("And why do *good* girls in French films turn out to be *naughty*?"") makes it sound, it is a failure. If, however, as the editors say, it is designed for students and for people with a particular interest in the media of mass culture and if part of that design is to set the reader to thinking—and probably to talking—*Mass Culture* has fulfilled its intention.

COMMUNICATIONS

Literary Criticism, A Short History

Sirs:

Presumably trying to show close familiarity with our book, your reviewer, Robert Martin Adams, elects to criticize us under the head of "verbal accuracy," offering five instances where he believes we have slipped. One of these is a typist's or printer's error in a date. (We have a handful of such items, waiting correction in our first reprinting, and upon receipt of a stamped, self-addressed envelope will be glad to send them to any reviewer.) Two other instances have nothing to do with verbal accuracy in the same sense but are matters of judgment in critical vocabulary. Mr. Adams assumes a posture of purism long enough to boggle at a "neologism" and a Latin plural. In the two remaining instances, he simply doesn't know what he is talking about. If he will read p. 688, line 17 again, even he ought to be able to discover that "lyric" and not "drama" is the right word for the argument. As for the apparently whimsical appearance of "Susie Hoch" in our acknowledgment of permission to quote Sigmund Freud's *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, we refer Mr. Adams to the publishers of that volume. Perhaps he can persuade them that they too are "charming intruders" and thus win for us a rebate of the fee which we paid for the privilege of the quotation.

In another paragraph Mr. Adams expresses his discontent that in our *Short History of Literary Criticism* (which he finds already too long) we have included neither a history of classical scholarship from J. J. Scaliger to A. E. Housman nor a history of the development of modern literary research tools—the *OED*, the *DNB*, the *Short Title Catalogue*. Mr. Adams' lists of authors and books we have not mentioned are, as a matter of fact, not quite accurate. A greater reliance on our text than on a not elaborate index might have shown him, for instance, two places where the *OED* is "pointed out." But his merely cavilling bad judgment here is a matter of more consequence than his inaccuracy. He might have added the Library of Congress "National Union Catalog" and Isadore Gilbert Mudge's *Guide to Reference Books*. Yes, we left these out.

Among numerous passages in our book which might have proved instructive to Mr. Adams had he been able to read them is one on pp. 533-34 which describes the nineteenth-century alliance between tough scholarship and various kinds of belletristic emotivism and expressionism. Several signs in recent issues of the quarterlies suggest that this alliance is about to enjoy a revival, but a slightly twisted one. Certain new amateur critics have been evolving strangely out of earlier shapes as doctrinaire sociological critics. They will use their philology, or their venerable symbols of a philology, mainly as a way of claiming a toughness which they have really abandoned. (Pages 469-71 of our book make some observations upon the affinity of historical literary criticism for the Marxist dialectic. With Mr. Adams, however, it is difficult to believe that the

tenderness for library tools is more than opportunistic. See the assault on several schools of historical criticism in his *Ikon: John Milton and the Modern Critics*, 1955.) The fundamental principle of Mr. Adams' literary philosophy is a mistrust of philosophy. Perhaps it does not hurt him to think. He appears nevertheless to consider thinking about literary problems a waste of energy. "The authors," he says, "have a truly pedagogical way of seeking out and asking all the hard, and especially the abstract questions implicit in any literary situation." "These questions," he adds, "make the reader stop and think. Sometimes he thinks about the answer to the question, sometimes about the question itself—occasionally about the man who asked it." So be it, Mr. Adams. And what he thinks about the man who asked the question will depend a good deal, will it not, upon the intellectual, or anti-intellectual, character of the reader himself?

Mr. Adams is an amateur so little aware of either criticism or the history of criticism that he is annoyed by the observation that the rhetorical practice of Alexander Pope corresponds less closely to the theory of his own day than to that of the Elizabethan textbooks. (As for the relation of causality involved here, or not involved, an easily available essay by one of the present writers has discussed this matter at some length and might clear up Mr. Adams' little flurry of puzzlement.) "Who made Puttenham the center of the universe?" Mr. Adams himself, on p. 287 of his review. Mr. Adams is again so little concerned with evaluating either criticism or the history of criticism (so much apparently given to viewing criticism as a closed book) that he is surprised when the present writers find some things right and some things less right in the aesthetic of Benedetto Croce. "One had thought that . . . Croce had a philosophy which it is enough to understand." Indeed! And how well would one have thought one understood this philosophy if one were able to form no opinion at all about its rightness or wrongness?

Mr. Adams opens his review with a moment of drama. He invokes a "lady of his acquaintance," who exclaims "Really?" as she picks up a "new book about criticism," "ruffles through it for a moment," says "Oh" and "Ah", and "closing the volume with a snap," "How terrifying," and lays it aside. ("Another d-mn'd thick, square book! Always scribble, scribble, scribble!") Just why the response of this lackadaisical lady should be considered an appropriate or excusable keynote for a review of two histories of literary criticism may not be very clear. But we suggest that this lady is an adequate stand-in for Mr. Adams himself, that nothing he has said in his review of our book reveals any serious attempt to read it.

W. K. WIMSATT, JR.

CLEANTH BROOKS

New Haven, Connecticut

Dear Sirs,

I am sorry that the authors of the *Short History* think I have not tried to read their book carefully. In this impression they are certainly mistaken. I for my part regret that in two of five instances I have wrongly imputed to them verbal error. That the book is badly-written, ill-organized, and unnecessarily pretentious in its manner remains perfectly true. But, if only in view of my own oversights, I must withdraw the charge of verbal carelessness and express my sincere regret to the authors.

More broadly, I should like to comment on the opportunism which I am said to have demonstrated in pleading for a more generous recognition of historical criticism (including library tools, biographies, editions, books of philology, etc.). I believe that there are numerous literary questions with which criticism has dealt, intermittently and in response to emergent occasions, in various ways. I do not, in short, believe that there is any "continuity and intelligibility in the history of literary argument" apart from literary practice. The *Short History* is based on the assumption of such a continuity, and one of the consequences is that it concentrates on the abstractions of criticism to an extent which I think misleading. I think that criticism is a secondary art, which, when it becomes rigidly "systematic," often fails to adapt itself to the peculiar quality of the literary material which it discusses, out of which it grows, and to which, at its best, it remains subordinate. Historical critics make the mistake of exaggerating historical materials out of all relevance to the work which they are discussing—analogous errors are made by structural critics and metaphysical critics. All systems of criticism have a tendency—do not Messrs. Brooks and Wimsatt agree?—to unparticularize the work of art. I am sceptical of these generalizations. I am sceptical of generalizations founded on the works of art and still more of those founded on works of criticism. I am in the supreme degree sceptical of a critical theory which proposes that all poets are trying to do substantially the same thing with language, and all true criticism is trying to arrive at the same sort of judgment. I think I have particular reason to be sceptical when I find that the one true goal which everyone is trying to achieve is the satisfaction of universal norms which were explicitly formulated only within the last thirty years.

Our little exchange over Croce shows nicely the difference between the authors' absolutism and my scepticism. The authors think they know when Croce is right and when he is wrong. He is wrong, they say, when he asks such questions as, "Is the work of art sincere, spontaneous, and authentic?" The word "wrong" used of this interrogative sentence can mean only that it is nonsense, and incapable of an answer. Now this the authors have not demonstrated, and I doubt that they can. The question does not lead to answers which their system can handle, but theirs is not the only system, and I doubt that it is the "right" one. No system is the "right" one which cannot make room for this question, if it is in the faintest degree relevant to any literary experience aroused by any literary work.

As for my lady, she was protesting against the remoteness of critical schemata from the common reader's experience. I see a certain unfairness in this—a paper in physics is not written for the common reader, why should a history of criticism be so? Yet there is a difference. Criticism at its best serves to illuminate an experience we have already had. A humane and experienced reader has, then, the right to be heard when she protests that the critical schemes simply ignore or negate all the values for which she reads literature. This is precisely the point—not that the schemes are hard or hazy with metaphysics, though they may be so, but that they dehumanize a humane experience.

I must add to this that I think literary discussion is best conducted without the apparatus of *odium theologicum*, personal sneers, and the imputation of improper motives. The authors are angry at a review not as favorable as they think their book deserves; but when they suggest that their critic cannot read or does not like to think, they are implying that their prose is lucid and their logic impeccable. I am not the first to report that Mr. Wimsatt's prose is musclebound and Mr. Brooks's logic specious and obfuscatory.

ROBERT MARTIN ADAMS

Ithaca, New York

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